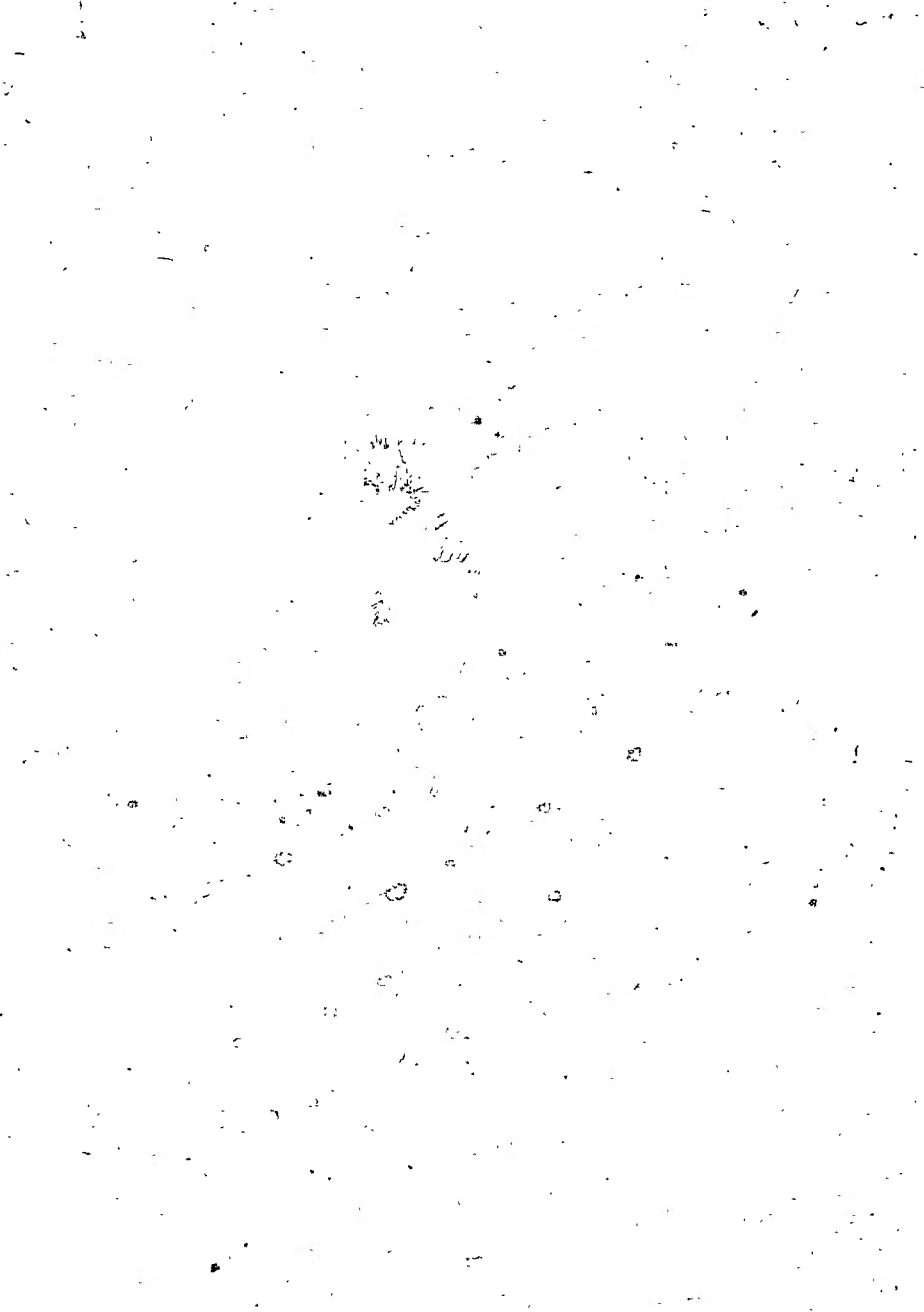


THE MUD LARK

by
**ARTHUR
STRINGER**



Arthur Stringer.



THE MUD LARK

By ARTHUR STRINGER

THE DOOR OF DREAD

THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SLEEP

THE HOUSE OF INTRIGUE

TWIN TALES

THE PRAIRIE WIFE

THE PRAIRIE MOTHER

THE PRAIRIE CHILD

THE WIRE TAPPERS

PHANTOM WIRES

THE GUN RUNNER

THE DIAMOND THIEVES

LONELY O'MALLEY

EMPTY HANDS

POWER

IN BAD WITH SINBAD

WHITE HANDS

THE WOLF WOMAN

A WOMAN AT DUSK

THE WOMAN WHO COULDN'T DIE

OUT OF ERIN

A LADY QUITE LOST



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By
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TO

POLLY and PAT

In their western shack;
And the chuck-camp smoke
And the corded pack;
And the patter of hoofs
On a sun-washed track;
And the talks by a fire
When the world was awrack
And the snow-flakes curled
Through a whistling crack;
And the hearts that were light
When the skies hung black;
And the glad good days
That can never come back!

A. S.



THE MUD LARK



The Mud Lark

Chapter One

I HAVE died and gone to hell.

No, it's worse than hell, for I've just said good-by to England and everything I love; I've lost the man I adored and what little money I had; I've bidden farewell to my self-respect and agreed to travel third-class to a God-forsaken colony where the winters last three-quarters of a year and the natives are known as God's Frozen People; I've got a cold in the head and feel as friendless as a leper; and I've been abandonedly seasick and just lost my breakfast.

But, having parted with that breakfast, I already feel better. Collins, the tuck-steward in his none too clean jacket, was quite right when he proclaimed: "You'll feel a 'eap better, ma'am, once you 'ave emptied yourself."

I have.

And I do.

And I've just remembered what mordant old Saw-Bones Somerset said about writers and writing, how there's no tragedy in life that won't dissolve in ink, how misery can be exterminated by merely getting it down on paper, and how the best way to get rid of a broken heart is to put it into a book.

That's why I'm sitting here on the sunny side of a salt-encrusted donkey-engine while the spray blows through my hair and the bow of the *Laurania* plows into the slate-gray waves of the North Atlantic. In my hand I have the gold-banded fountain-pen that Cousin Hugh gave me last Christmas. And on my blanket-swaddled knees I have the virginal big journal that Lady Helen gave me at Bath, on my birthday, the two hundred and forty neatly lined pages of empty white paper so neatly bound in pin-seal, with the nifty little clasp and padlock of silver, to insure secrecy for the abandoned thoughts that the hand of hopelessness may commit to its interior.

But those inviting white pages, I know, are going to be my life-preserver, a funk-hole to harbor me when the big shells come too thick, a safety-valve to keep me from blowing up. For I'm going to Boswellize this battered heart of mine. I'm going to hang out my soul's washing, to sweeten and dry in the open sun. What is here recorded will be not only the simple annals of Joan Alicia Eustis but also a porous-plaster for my aching *amour propre*. And ten to one my pop-eyed grandchildren will read these disjointed memoirs, when I'm dead and gone to Glory, and realize I wasn't as spineless and lawless a lady as I may have seemed. For, since in ten days' time I'm duly and deliberately to enter the state of matrimony, it's only reasonable to assume that some day I'll have children and that these children will in turn have children of their own.

It sounds simple enough. But, frankly, I haven't yet got it entirely straightened out in my own empty head. And it will help to clear up the cloudy parts, I feel certain, if I do what I can to put the cold facts down on paper. Little as my poor old language-loving Dad left his orphaned child, he at least bequeathed me the gift of words. I'm usually able, I think, to express myself. And I agree with Somerset: once you've expressed an unhappiness you seem to get rid of it. For misery, after all, is a great deal like the electron: it disappears in the act of becoming visible.

Even as I write, oddly enough, I begin to feel a little easier in body and soul. But satisfying as it may be to get your thoughts in the open, it's sometimes more satisfying to get your body there. And up here, thank heaven, I'm free from smells, the sickening smell of lead paint and disinfectant and engine-oil that haunts the bowels of this ship, the greasy odor of food that fills our dingy third-class dining-room, the even more devastating fumes of the cheap Jockey-Club scent that my three man-eating cabin-mates anoint their persons with, when they would be much better taking a bath. For there is, notwithstanding the American Declaration of Independence, such a thing as class, or caste, or whatever you care to call it. And about the darkest tragedy in life, I fancy, is a first-class mind in a third-class environment. Even those stewards of ours down below, I've noticed, are a little less carefully shaved and garbed, a little looser in their

attitude toward passengers, a little more sullen in the way they do you a bit of service. A third engineer with a receding chin and a cauliflower ear has even been making eyes at me. And the ship's Doctor, a sandy-haired Scotchman from Old Reekie, has twice come down to examine my own eyes, to make sure I haven't trachoma. That, at least, is his story.

But I'm away from all that, up here in the *Laurania's* windy bow where I can breathe fresh air and feel my harried self-respect come back, like a flurried lark to its nest. And since I must start at the beginning, I may as well start with Leslie. Everything in my life, in fact, seems to start with Leslie. He was the high and shining star to which my girlhood hitched its creaking little wagon of faith. It used to give me gooseflesh, just to see him coming down the Carterets' winding stairway to breakfast, or reach for a spill to light his pipe, or pick a tea-rose on the garden-terrace. He seemed a thing of sheer beauty to me. I used to shiver when he played Schubert for Aunt Allie and Lady Alicia. I was only ten years old but I was jealous when he went riding with Lady Alicia. Once, when he came prancing out of Sheppard's Wood, with the sunset behind him, he made me think of Sir Galahad. And I told him so. He merely pinched my chin and called me a "rum kid." But I was satisfied to think that he had even stooped to touch me.

And when he went off to war he was more than ever my hero. The first pair of socks I ever knitted were

for him. They puckered in the heel and had no toes to speak of, but I carried the letter he wrote to me about them next to my heart. And when he came back from Loos, so magnificently wounded, I tremblingly took him flowers and bought calf's-foot jelly for him with my tuck-shop money. Later on, when he was able to be helped out under the Carteret pear-trees, I used to go over and sit with him, wishing, as I watched him with the blind and tingling devotion of thirteen, that I was something more than an inarticulate tomboy in pigtails. But I was soon glad enough to give up hockey and tennis and bow-and-arrow shooting to read to Leslie when the air was heavy and his poor war-gassed lungs simply wouldn't behave.

I loved being with him. I was jealous of the other women, the mysterious and remote older women who knew how to fix his pillows and talk amiably about the alterations in Marlborough House and the private view at the Academy and the brand-new dancer at the Gaiety. That, I fancy, is why even my father's death and my none too welcome invasion of Uncle Gregory Wentringer's home-circle impressed me as less calamitous than the abrupt news that Leslie was leaving for South Africa. For two long and empty years I remained loyal to his memory.

But he remembered me, when he came back, bronzed and lean and foreign-looking. He even made me blush pink by publicly asserting that I was much too big and much too pretty to kiss. I saw him only once,

for ten days later I was bundled off to a convent-school in Switzerland, an arctic and awful convent-school where ninety-seven thin-blooded and homesick little girls broke the ice in the pitchers and tried through snow-bound Alpine winters to keep warm with inadequate bed clothes and even more inadequate food. No wonder we looked spiritualized, before the end of our second term.

When I came back to England, two years later, Leslie still remembered me. But he must have forgotten about my bigness. For he *did* kiss me, this time, the first afternoon we were on the river together, and then promptly tore my heart out by telling me he was going down to Penzance for the winter to write a book. I remained at the Hall and became a sort of barnacle, a limpet hanging on to less impecunious relatives. I slipped into my rôle of unconsidered appendice carried about by more important people. When I went up to London I was usually taken along either as a meek-eyed ayah or a nimble-fingered Abigail who could unpack boxes and answer calls and run messages without taking up too much room. When I went to Bath I was permitted to sojourn there primarily for the purpose of keeping the Wentringer Twins from falling into the Roman pool. And even when I went to the Riviera with Lady Helen I went as something midway between a traveling-companion and a lady's maid.

But it was on the Riviera, at Cannes, that I so unex-

pectedly met Leslie, who happened to join us again at Hyères, and to follow us on to Biarritz. Lady Helen, however, didn't seem to approve of Leslie. She even changed her plans and headed for home, where she must have had a talk with Uncle Gregory Wentringer, for Uncle Gregory said some abominably rude things to Leslie, I understood, when he came over from the Carterets' a few weeks later.

For three long years, at any rate, Leslie sedulously avoided me and my kin. And, being a one-man dog, I suffered accordingly. But Kismet laughs at cold-blooded uncles. And Time is nothing to a trusting heart. It wasn't until Aunt Allie's sudden illness and death that I realized what a toppling thing the Wentringer fortune was. But Cousin Hugh, on the drive back from the funeral, told me the family had just about reached the end of its rope and talked rather dispiritedly about going out to Australia. And that gave me an excuse to escape being a parasite. I was a bit tired, I think, of teaching Italian to the Twins and hanging about the fringe of the idle rich—who weren't always as rich as they appeared to be. And I was good and tired of my own genteel poverty. So I decided to learn typing. I fully intended becoming private secretary to the Bishop of London or the key-tinkling *confidante* of some foreign diplomat who would consign tremendous state secrets to my keeping. But it seemed the most natural thing in the world, when both the Bishop and the foreign diplomat failed me,

to find myself in London giving six rhapsodical hours a day to Leslie's second war-story, which looked dangerously like a failure until they turned it into that rather terrible cinema.

Now, my work as a typist, to Uncle Gregory's way of thinking, was about as debasing as a scullery maid's. It simply wasn't done, by his kind of women. He never found anything especially opprobrious about my pounding the keys of a piano, to make pleasant sounds for his amusement after dinner. But pounding the keys of a typewriter, to make chapters that would later make a book that would later amuse an army of readers, was altogether a different story. You're not a gentleman, according to Uncle Gregory and his landed gentry, if you do anything useful. I loved working for Leslie, although he made it a point, for three solemnly mendacious months, to keep a book-laden work-table between us. I was really a help to him.

He knew it, of course. And I knew he liked having me there. He liked it so much, in fact, that he no longer remained on his own side of the book-laden table. And Uncle Gregory walked in on us one afternoon, when we were standing arm in arm at the window, watching the sun go down beyond Putney, going down in a golden glow that turned all London into the most ethereal of cities. And there was the devil to pay. Leslie cleared the air by rather grimly announcing to my embattled guardian that we were engaged, that

we had, in fact, been definitely engaged for the last half-year. He even bought me a ring, a week later, but I noticed a new restraint in his manner. When I offered to release him, however, he grimly announced that we were going to be married, as soon as the book was finished. We would live in Tunbridge Wells, and write a novel a year, and be the happiest couple in all England.

But the book, for some reason or other, refused to be finished. Leslie developed a cough, and went to Mentone for a month. Then he returned to England and took a little villa at Bournemouth. He intended to stay there, he told me, until he'd won his battle with those intractable last chapters.

And as I thought of him, toiling alone there in that lonely little hillside villa, I felt that something was wrong. I felt he needed me. A new and terrible loneliness began to prowl through my body, like a black cat prowling through an attic. I wanted my Leslie. And, all of a sudden, I decided to go to him. His health, I fancied, was worse than he pretended. I pictured him as lonely and neglected, as ill, with nobody to look after him in his weakness. And my place was at his side.

Yet I waited for another three days, still hoping a letter would come from him. Then I could wait no longer. I saw him, in my mind's eye, propped up on pillows and fighting for breath. I even saw him fallen over one of the sandstone cliffs, in a passing

moment of weakness, or lying battered and broken in a chine somewhere along Poole Bay.

I went straight to the villa, when I got to Bournemouth. I knew, as soon as I saw him, that something was wrong. His face was white and there was a cold constraint in his manner that chilled my blood. I thought, as I stared at him with his back so resolutely against the bedroom door, that he was indeed ill. It wasn't until I saw the jaunty green cloche and the knitted green jumper over the chair-back that I understood.

"There's another woman here," I said, stopping in the middle of taking off my glove.

Leslie was a poor liar. He gave up, in fact, trying to argue away the obvious. And there was nothing left for me but to swallow my medicine. I realized, for the first time in my life, how shock can bring an actual pain to your heart. But I didn't break down.

I left Leslie's ring on the table, beside his cigarette-case. I realized, on the way back to London, how all my earlier and unformulated fears had been confirmed. I felt as though I were on my way back from a funeral. Something big and wonderful had died out of my life. Life itself had tumbled to pieces about my ears. I had believed unquestioningly in Leslie's goodness. I had accepted him as a second Sir Galahad, a knightly and clean-hearted prince. I had pinned my faith to him. He had stood my one and only happiness. And without him I felt lost. It was like having a liner go

down without giving you time to get into a life-belt. It was like being wrecked in mid-ocean, without even a friendly hen-coop to keep you afloat.

I was sunk. I was so sunk that Hugh, when he met me at Midhurst, helped me into his motor-car as though I were an old lady. And once we were on our way he swept me with a sharp glance and asked me if I was ill. I told him I was only tired. But he knew it was a lie.

Finally he said, without looking at me: "You've found out about Foraker." And that punctured my last little balloon of pretense.

"Oh, Hugh, why didn't you tell me?" I cried out. "It's simply not done," said grim-eyed old Hugh. "And you wouldn't have believed us, anyway." Then he did his best to argue that it would be over and forgotten in a year. But I knew he was wrong. The bottom had fallen out of my world. I wanted to go to the end of the earth and jump off into space. I didn't wish to be pitied. All I wanted was to be alone, to be alone and lick my wounds and forget to remember about the ache in my heart.

I told Hugh, as we turned in through the big iron gates, that I didn't see how I was going to face them. I could picture them about the fire, at the tea-hour, and me trying to join in their chatter and their brave enough pretense that all was as it should be. And Hugh understood. I wasn't sniffing, but he could see that I was red-eyed from more than the wind.

"That's all right, Jo-Jo," he said with his defensive English roughness. "Go up to your room and get into something loose. And remember, if you hear us singing, that yours isn't the only apple-cart that's gone over."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I mean," said Hugh as he helped me out and tossed my bag to Benson, "that the pater's Chilean Nitrate Company went bust last week. And that means we'll all probably go on the dole!"

Chapter Two

I'M SUPPOSED to have a sense of humor. But, like Uncle Gregory's gift for finance, it doesn't always seem to work. So I couldn't exactly discern how Hugh's advice about getting into something loose was going to help me much. I was, however, glad enough to be alone with my misery. Emily Ann, the under-cook, came bustling up from the kitchen and lighted my fire and brought up tea and crumpets and buttered scones. Emily Ann may have neglected her teeth, in earlier days, but she never neglected me. When she found my tea-tray untouched, half an hour later, she accosted me with a respectfully reproving eye.

"You look, Miss Joan, as if you 'ad been struck all of a 'eap," she said with her head on one side, like a robin searching for turf-worms.

"I have," I told Emily Ann.

"'Ow about a nice 'ot bath?" she promptly suggested. And a nice 'ot bath, I remembered, was Emily Ann's panacea for all earthly ills.

"I'm afraid it's something that hot water won't wash away," I dispiritedly acknowledged.

"Then 'ow about a 'ot toddy?" said Emily Ann as she made up the fire. "There's a 'eap o' flu about, Miss Joan."

But I shook my head. "All I want," I assured Emily

Ann, "is a little quiet." And Emily Ann, being a servant of discretion, proceeded to withdraw her ample person from my presence. She stopped at the door, however, hesitated, then once more confronted me. I knew by the way she blinked at the floor-rugs that she had something on her mind.

"Might I 'ave a word with you, Miss Joan?" she finally ventured. "Seein' as it's so quiet like up here, and me in a bit o' trouble myself."

"You in trouble, Emily Ann?" I gasped, incredulous. I sat down and looked at her, awakened by that sister-call of calamity. I saw an ample-bosomed and pale-eyed woman of about thirty-five, with severely plain hair slightly touched with gray and a vaguely bulbous body and flat feet and a plum-colored wart on her apple-red cheek. Emily Ann was not much to look at. But she was honest and incorrigibly kind-hearted.

"It's about gettin' married, Miss Joan," announced Emily Ann, her apple-red face going a shade ruddier.

"You're getting married?" I echoed. And this time I was indeed struck all of a heap. For the honest Emily Ann had never impressed me as the marrying kind. She had, for all her delusively ample bosom, the dehydrated look of the predestined old maid. But you never can tell. You may be wrong in your guess, even in a country which is reputed to have three million females too many.

"That's what I can't make up my mind about," Emily Ann was saying.

"But you have a chance?" I none too graciously demanded.

"I 'ave," Emily Ann proudly proclaimed. But she subsided, a moment later, suspiciously like a punctured tire. "At least, in a manner of speakin' I 'ave."

"Who is he and what is he like?" I asked, waving aside her momentary compunctions. For the mere prospect of marrying, in the case of Emily Ann, stood sufficiently arresting.

"I can't exactly say," said the unhappy-eyed under-cook.

"But you've seen him and talked to him?" I prompted.

"I've never seen 'ide nor 'air of 'im," announced Emily Ann, "and that's what makes it so 'ard."

"Then tell me about it," I said as I reached for the teapot. And I wondered how many women, in their time, had found tea a substitute for happiness.

But Emily Ann hesitated, confused, I suspected, by the thought of a confession so intimate.

"Might I go fetch 'is photograph, Miss Joan," she suggested, visibly brightening, "and the circular that 'as all the arrangements explained?"

"Emily Ann," I cried, "you haven't been wasting your time with one of those ridiculous matrimonial agencies, have you?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," answered the slightly ruffled Emily Ann. "It's all regular and respectable, as you'll see when I fetch the circular."

I couldn't help feeling, as I awaited the return of Emily Ann, that the tides of passion were considerably more far-reaching than I had fancied. And this suspicion seemed confirmed when I observed the unsteadiness of Emily Ann's thick fingers as she placed a photograph on the desk before me.

"That's 'im," she announced with quiet and singularly possessive pride.

I took the photograph and studied it. I saw a gaunt and awkward figure of a man of about thirty, in ill-fitting clothes, standing stiff-necked beside a small ormolu-topped center-table, on which his great bony hand none too lightly rested. His face, four-square and bony, made me think of history-book pictures of Abraham Lincoln, in his younger day. His eyes were honest enough, but the heavy glower on the brow above them awakened a suspicion that he had submitted to the mercies of a small-town photographer only under compulsion.

"'E was the only one left," Emily Ann said over my shoulder. "You see, 'e 'as no sink in 'is 'ouse."

But my thoughts, as she spoke, were still on the photograph. For there was something arresting about that rough and high-shouldered hulk of a man. There was bigness about him, and a touch of hardness. He made me think of a granite rock, strong but shapeless, rather grim about the mouth, rather sorrowful about the eyes, which looked as though they had often watched a wide and windy world. I thought, at first,

that he was a Boer from the South African veldt. But when I turned over the photograph I found written on the back: "James Bentley Gilson, Elk Crossing, Alberta, wheat-grower, aged 28, weight 184 pounds, dark, steady, took prize last year for best Marquis wheat, 320 acres, 19 miles from shopping-town, 4-roomed shack, good well, but no radio, piano, or sink in kitchen."

"'E looks a bit 'eadstrong," said Emily Ann with a sigh, "and a bit 'ard to manage. 'E wouldn't be took upon."

"Why do you say that?" I asked, once more looking at the pallid-tinted picture.

"You see, Miss Joan," Emily Ann explained after a moment of hesitation, "'e's askin' for a 'ealthy and 'elpful wife, but 'e might not take kindly to one as was eight years older than 'isself."

"But I don't understand all this," I had to acknowledge.

"Well, it's simple enough," explained Emily Ann, "once you get the lay of the land. It's all through the Reverend Samuel Dollard, Miss."

"Who is the Reverend Samuel Dollard?" I asked.

"'E's the gentleman," explained Emily Ann, "as spoke over at the Agricultural Society Meetin' after the Flower Show. 'E's been doin' it all over England, 'avin' given up the Church and joined what 'e calls the colonizin' department of one of the great Canadian Railways. 'E takes out settlers, as a rule, and finds

'omes for immigrant girls. But this time 'e came to the Old Country to gather up twenty 'ealthy and attractive English girls. Each one of those girls is promised a 'usband."

"A husband they have never seen?" I demanded.

"A 'usband and a 'ome," murmured the wistful-eyed Emily Ann. "You see, Miss Joan, things is different out in the colonies. 'Ere we 'ave too many women, and none of us treated over-respectful. Out in western Canada, the Reverend Samuel was sayin', there is so few females that the 'ole country is woman-'ungry. It's a new country, settled by men who took up land on the fringe o' the wilderness, so to speak, and 'avin' built a cottage on their prairie farms and done their own cookin' and washin' for a year or two, the most o' them are fair clamorin' for wives. Even the women school-teachers as go out from the East, the Reverend Samuel was sayin', get married off so quick they can't keep the country schools a-goin' as they ought. And it's the same with the telephone girls in the towns across the prairie. The men just swoop off with them. And some o' them, Miss, even take up with squaws, with red Injun women wearin' a blanket. That shows 'ow 'ard pressed they are for 'elp-mates."

"I'm sure," I said as I glanced back at the photograph, "that James Bentley Gilson would never take up with a squaw. He looks much too proper for that."

"That's why I'm 'avin' my doubts," admitted the none too happy Emily Ann. "'E don't look like a man

who'd take kindly to being put upon. 'E might not like me. And it would shame a woman o' spirit, 'avin' paid out her good passage-money and gone 'alf-way round the world, to find 'erself given the cold shoulder when she got there."

"It would, indeed, Emily Ann," I was compelled to acknowledge. "But he would soon find out what a wonderful cook you are."

"'E might be wantin' something more than cookin'," pointed out the pensive-eyed Emily Ann.

"Well, a man who gets a wife that way," I promptly averred, "shouldn't demand too much of what was handed out to him." For the more I thought of this grab-bag way of acquiring a life-partner, the more I disapproved of it. I'd heard somewhere that they did that sort of thing three centuries ago in Virginia, where ship-loads of eager and unwed ladies were occasionally brought out for the lonely colonists. But I couldn't believe it was done in our day.

"Aren't you happy here?" I asked Emily Ann.

"Yes, I'm 'appy 'ere," she conceded, "but I've a 'ankerin' to marry, Miss. We all 'ave it, I suppose."

That gave me something to think about. But I wasn't too openly agreeing with Emily Ann.

"Then why don't you marry?" I demanded. "This mail-order person has seen your photograph. That ought to show him clearly enough what he's getting."

I observed, as Emily Ann shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, that her legs were curiously like a

jockey's, bewilderingly curved and inadequate. But legs, after all, would never show in a photograph.

"There's where the 'itch comes, Miss Joan," explained the unhappy Emily Ann. "I 'ad a picture taken, over to Midhurst, and it was so 'opeless I was left fair desperit, with 'im dependin' on me and all. So it comes in to my 'ead like a flash, when the Reverend Samuel said all pictures would 'ave to go out by the next post, to send that one Master 'Ugh took of you in the grape-arbor when you first come back from Switzerland. I cut away all but the 'ead and shoulders and said it was a snap-shot taken in my girl'ood, ten years ago. It was a 'orrible thing to do, Miss Joan, but the thought of gettin' a 'usband in some way swept me off my feet."

I knew, by Emily Ann's woebegone face, that I wasn't the only woman in England who knew the taste of trouble.

"And you attached my name to it?" I asked as quietly as I could.

"Oh, no, Miss," was Emily Ann's slightly indignant response. "I wouldn't be that 'igh-'anded. I was known as Number Nineteen. The Reverend Samuel kept the names on this side 'idden, so's there'd be no goin' over 'is 'ead."

"And did Mister James Bentley Gilson of Elk Crossing approve of me?" I asked the watery-eyed and contrite Emily Ann.

"'E does," announced Emily Ann, not without a

sense of dramatic values. "And 'e's out there waitin' for you!"

I sat down and thought this over. Then I took up the pallid-toned photograph and studied it for the third time.

"And what are *you* going to do?" I asked.

"I can't go on with it," asserted the tremulous Emily Ann. "It wouldn't be honest like. 'E'd know I'd been a liar."

"But it doesn't seem fair, does it, to disappoint the gentleman?"

"That's what's been troublin' me, Miss Joan," confessed the penitent Emily Ann. "And 'im all worked up and expectin' so much!"

I could feel the wheels of thought going around at the back of my brain. I could see the dust-cloud that still hung over my disorganized world, the scattered hopes where my apple-cart had gone over. But I still can't entirely understand what impulses born of desperation brought me to so abrupt a decision.

"Emily Ann," I said after a second hurried glance through the circular, "I've just come a cropper. I've had a knock-down blow. I'm stumped. And I want to get out of England. What would you say if I suggested that we don't disappoint the gentleman over there on the wheat-ranch?"

Emily Ann stood aghast.

"You don't mean as you'd pick a 'usband like that?" she asked, breathing heavily.

"Why not?" I quietly inquired. "All marriage is a lottery. And men and women never really know each other. They seem, in spite of intensive courtships and common interests, to keep on making the most terrible mistakes in the matter of mating. It's always a gamble. So why not make it a long-range one?"

"You wouldn't be 'appy," contended the startled Emily Ann.

"I'm not happy now, Emily Ann. In fact, I've just about touched bottom."

"But, askin' your pardon, 'ow could you cook for 'im?" questioned the queen of pots and pans.

"I was hoping, Emily Ann, that you would teach me something about that. And if he doesn't approve of the way I broil a kidney for breakfast, I can read him a page or two of Dante in the original Italian."

Emily Ann, I'm afraid, didn't quite know what I was driving at. Nor did she fully understand, until my fourth humbly industrious afternoon amid her shimmering metalware, that I was deciding out of a clear sky to join the Reverend Samuel Dollard's group of expectant-eyed emigrants and go out to Canada and marry a wheat-rancher I had never seen.

But beggars, after all, can't be over-fastidious choosers. And the die is cast. Alberta, I hear you calling me. And westward the tide of wifehood takes its way. I'm going to corral a pig-in-a-poke husband. And I've agreed to become a sort of parcel-post bride. It's about as absurd, in a way, as being picked out by

some slant-eyed Eskimo with a year's supply of seal-meat in his igloo and a slice of Aurora Borealis over his shoulder. But it's not much worse, when you come to think of it, than the regular way. Life has humbled me. It has also, as it does with most homeless pups, made me more or less adjustable. I'm going to follow my photograph. And if I can't make a cherry-pie, Jamie Boy, I can at least amble on to Victoria and teach the three R's to the Allingham children. People like to say we English are no longer an adventurous race, that we are no longer open-minded and adaptable. That may be true. But here's a time when I'm going to adapt, or blow up in the effort!

Chapter Three

I've been on ships before, for even a barnacle can do its bit of seafaring. But this is the first time I ever traveled and made my home in the bowels of a boat. And the visceral regions of this liner are unexpectedly noisy. And also smelly. We are down next to the storeroom, where the meat and fish are taken out of cold storage and cut up. So we're enveloped, night and day, in a clubby odor of cod and sole and kidneys and turnips and onions. And there's always the engine-oil and disinfectant smell, to say nothing of the rather moldy aroma of bilge-water and sodden matting. It makes me think of a dungeon, with its absence of sunlight and its steel doors along the alleyways and the peremptory way we are commanded to move about. But the worst of it all, I think, is the vibration. Night and day, beneath our stern-end cabin-floor, the great screws thresh and quiver. They never stop. They hum me to sleep at night and shake me awake in the morning. And if there's any motion, we get the full benefit of it. It's small wonder the three blooming damsels who share my bald little stateroom with me, two off a dairy-farm and one an ex-barmaid from Berkshire, have been companionably and continuously seasick. And it's no wonder I'm glad to get up on deck and sun myself on a hatch-cover, where the first-class

passengers can stare down at me and wonder what obscure corner of Czecho-Slovakia or Czenstochowa gave me birth.

But this voyage, I'm beginning to see, is a fit and proper preparation for what's ahead of me. It's slowly but surely taking the pride out of me and putting me in my place. For after being herded about like cattle, and as plainly ticketed as the peers' pegs in the House of Lords, and as impersonally inspected as lingerie on a Hounds-ditch barrow, to say nothing of those two unspeakable days at Atlantic Park, I should be ready for anything that life may offer. I've even begun to realize that I'm not of as much importance as I once imagined. I'm meek enough for any kind of matrimony. And I'm not even popular with my traveling companions. Aggie 'Athaway of the dairy-farm, who in her steadier moments not inappropriately peruses a paper-bound volume entitled *Marriage Made Easy*, resents my aloofness from their over-intimate speculations as to the marital relationship and has cuttingly dubbed me "Miss-'Igh-and-Mighty." And the opulent and rosy-cheeked ex-barmaid, who would be a good-looking woman if she were only satisfied with her face as God made it, is exulting in her conquests of Collins, the dirty-jacketed tuck-steward, who triumphantly brings her an orange every morning, thereby supplanting Hawkins, a rival official who could merely offer her a first go at our communal bathtub, a potential priority, I might add, which *mal-de-mer* seems to

render valueless and Jockey-Club scent seems to leave unnecessary. I'm glad, in fact, that a rolling deck is keeping most of my traveling mates to their berths. For they seem rather animal-like, both in their outlook on life and in their manner of eating.

The only bright spot, so far, has been little Tony Lavorgna, an Italian boy with a rather battered old violin and a homesick body that he keeps alive by his music. He's olive-brown and verminous and little bigger than a minute. But how that lad can play! He seems all flame, all fire and soul. He eats like a pig, and he's going out to work in his big brother's barber-shop in Winnipeg. But he agrees with me that the North Atlantic is a gray and gloomy waste of waters. For Tony, like myself, has left his heart behind him. And I wonder, as I sit here writing this, if any one at home is giving this wandering child a thought.

With the exception of a grimly acquiescent Emily Ann and an even more grimly protesting Hugh, they all nurse the conviction that I'm demurely bound for Victoria, where I'm to be a sort of lady-tutor to the numerous progeny of a half-pay navy officer by the name of Allingham, though Captain Waddington, *alias* Jocund Jerry, openly expressed a suspicion that I intended to fly an air-mail route for the sub-Arctic colonials. But I seem to be doing something much more perilous.

Hugh's face, for example, was a study in shell-shocked respectability when I first broke the awful news to him. He took me down to the Lower Mead-

ow, after he'd recovered from the first seismic upheaval, and told me flatly that I couldn't go on with it. My life was my own, of course, but there were certain things an English gentlewoman simply didn't do. Hugh, I am afraid, suspected that I'd gone a bit balmy. He even took me off in the car, the next day, and did what he could to argue me out of the whole crazy enterprise. Then, realizing that talk wasn't getting him anywhere, he insisted on paying a visit to the Reverend Samuel himself, before anything was done about passports and my passage money was paid over.

Hugh couldn't find anything actually fraudulent about the scheme, but he made no effort to conceal his belief that my shepherd-to-be was an unctuous and oily old hypocrite. He also suspects that Master James Bentley Gilson is a cross between an Albertan Bluebeard and what our friends the French would call a mackerel. But, seeing that he couldn't move me an inch, even after gallantly protesting I was too good-looking a girl to throw myself away on a prairie clodhopper, poor old frustrated Hugh finally bowed to the inevitable. He bought me a three-guinea tennis-racket, and sent it to the steamer, along with a basket of fruit and two pints of champagne which awakened the disdainful sniffs of my cabin-mates. He wanted, of course, to come down to the boat and see me off. But I'd already had a look over a goodly portion of the Reverend Samuel's cortège. And I flatly refused to let Hugh adventure down to Southampton. I told him, truth-

fully enough, that it would hurt too much. The only help I got during those last days was from Emily Ann, who somewhat grudgingly accepted my French traveling-bag in exchange for her own big and battered canvas "telescope" and somewhat ruefully helped me pack the latter with my carefully censored belongings. She even informed me that it seemed a bit like going 'erself, what with 'elping me off and seeing her own telescope duly labeled for the *Laurania*. But solemn old Hugh made me promise not to be photographed or interviewed for the penny papers. And if I needed help, I was to cable him at once. He sat beside me, in fact, exactly as though he were participating in a funeral, on that last afternoon when he whisked me in through the big iron gates with all the familiar old curves and curlicues in them and for the last time carried me along the drives where we had once jiggled up and down in a governess-cart and fallen off bicycles and buried each other in the drifts of autumn leaves.

And it's odd, when you're doing a thing for the last time, when you know in your heart it can never be done again, how poignant every move and moment becomes. You find out that Virgil was right when he said there were tears in things. I felt my throat tighten, as we swung in through the old iron gates where the ivy hugged the lodge-wall like a child's arm hugging its mother. It was just at sunset, and the two copper beeches at the first turn looked like twin fountains of faintly rustling fire. And beyond the park-slope,

with its lengthening tree-shadows, the last of the sunlight was falling across the mullioned windows of the west wing of the old Hall, lighting them up like fire. It bathed the eighteenth-century brick of the gabled walls in a warmer glow and gave a luster to even the dark masses of the creepers. I could see a peacock strutting slowly across the drive, and three white swans in the pool beyond the line of willows that fringed the Lower Meadow. I could see herbaceous borders and close-clipped hedges and time-mellowed garden-walls with a golden-gray bloom of lichen along their sagging bricks, and beyond the cloistered kitchen-garden and the tennis-court the sharper gables of the stables, with the tarnished and unturnable copper vane-cock that for ever faced the morning sun, and beyond that a second row of beeches that separated the park-land from the empty deer-run, where we once stalked Sioux and Comanches with home-made bows and arrows.

But what held me most was the house itself, the dour and dear old house with all its memories, with so many comings and goings, so many good times, so many births and deaths, so many generations of noisy children and romping dogs that grew old, so many wheels that swung up to the old white door with the three-cornered white pediment above it and the two great urns all silver and green with lichen beside it, so many happenings, both happy and sad, under the weathered tiles of mouse-gray that sloped down to the leads where Bubbling Bertie and I once essayed our first parachute-

leap with a family umbrella. No wonder it carried an air of serenity and detachment and permanence, as though it had always been there and would always remain there, a capacious and benignant-browed and kindly retreat that seemed glad to take you into its arms, as it had once taken me, a fidgety and wide-eyed and homeless child inordinately proud of my first full mourning.

Dear old house! It looked so substantial and enduring and time-defying that it seemed a part of England itself, our battered old England that may have been built with the sword and the flame but was still salted with the bones of my ancestors. Like England itself, it seemed ready to promise peace and protection and comfort. But it was a promise, I realized, that could never be carried out. The Hall, as I gazed at it, even made me think of a solemn old battleship that was about to be submarined. It was delightful to look at, but it was doomed. For ghostly perils were beleaguering its quiet gardens and ghostly sappers were undermining its pink-gray walls all covered with ivy. The Wentringers, for almost three centuries, had been fighting for security and struggling to make solid their fortune. They had fortified this home of theirs behind gold and iron and brick, dreaming always to remain there shut in with their accumulated comforts. But they had failed to fortify it against the subtler changes of Time and the alterations of a far-away world. The lean brown hands of peons eleven thou-

sand miles beyond its lichened walls were quietly stealing away its security. Blast-furnaces in far-off Pennsylvania were secretly burning up its hopes. Uncle Gregory Wentringer, solemnly child-minded and sure of himself, could still read the *Spectator* and ride to hounds and curse central heating and Lloyd George and the age of machinery. But while he was chasing a fox, in the midst of all those foolish red figures, the Wentringer counting-house was doing its bookkeeping in even more foolish red figures. For Uncle Gregory wasn't as rich as his friends imagined. He was, in fact, as poor as a church-mouse. He was a down-and-outer. But he said little about it. When it comes to catastrophe the Englishman can still hold his head high. But Englishmen don't seem able to unify their coal-mines or intensify their agriculture.

Even poor old Hugh, the one-time hope of the family, is sporting enough about it. He knows he's dished, but valorously pretends that everything is as it should be. He's a gentleman, a country gentleman, in the good old full-blooded English sense of being quite unable to do anything useful. He rides well and is good at tennis and golf and cricket. Like the rest of his rural kind, he's an adept at slaughtering things, whether it's rabbit-hunting or fly-fishing or grouse-shooting or salmon-killing. He can take a five-barred gate and breed dogs and grow standard roses and dispense Christmas charity to the villagers and wear Harris tweeds in the hunting-season and a topper when he

goes to London and lament the dolorous changes that are taking place in English life. Once, in fact, he even had a try at a bit of tutoring. But poor old Hugh couldn't tighten a nut on his motor-car, with his own hands, or assemble a carbureter or plow a furrow or lay a fire or blacken his own boots or make a shilling a day in a city office. For Hugh has been properly brought up, one of those unpractical, adorable, uselessly ornamental and expensively produced idlers who decorate the landscape of Herts and Hants and Bucks and Berks. Oxford turns them out by the thousands, endowing them with a hot-potato accent and a beguiling love for the classics and the ability to balance a tea-cup and twitter about art and culture and collect First Folios and tomb-jades and agricultural-society prizes. They may talk vaguely about going into politics some day, and growl about poachers and trippers and char-à-bancs, and storm about rates and taxes, and grouse about twentieth-century hustle and bustle. But that's about the worst they do. They are nice to be with. They are charming companions. But they live in the past and belong to the past, the past that seems to weigh so heavily on poor old England. Perhaps that's why that wicked American duchess declared that instead of producing Drakes and battling Nelsons we were now producing the world's best butlers.

I may have been all wrong, but the thought of no longer being a part of it rather took the wind out of my sails. I felt, as I looked about the huge old room

at the tea-hour, the shadowy big room with its familiar faces and its time-mellowed framed portraits and its brown mahogany and its cabinets of golden satinwood and its curtains of faded mulberry-red, that if they were a dying race they were at least passing away in a glory entirely their own.

All England, in fact, seemed poignantly lovely that last week. It seemed so old and established and rich in memories, so ordered and apportioned and peaceful, under those blue and gray autumn skies that bent so low over my head I got the feeling they were trying to lean down and kiss me good-by. Even the rain, when the clouds shut out the blue, seemed soft and peaceful. And there's no green like an English green. There were still flashes of color in the gardens and an unearthly glory about the hills and fields and soft-wooded valleys when Hugh, having waved farewell to the abandonedly weeping Twins at the drive-end, motored me and my prodigiously expanded telescope and my appropriately archaic box of horsehide, quaintly corded with cotton-rope, over to the station at Midhurst.

"If you're bound to go slumming," he announced with grimly restricted emotion as he put me aboard, "I s'pose you might just as well do it at sea."

I didn't know what was ahead of me then. So I told Hughie that I intended having the time of my life.

"I think you're crazy," he said as he gave me a disappointing small peck on the cheek. "But I've just

been trying to tell Lady Helen that you're really a mud lark."

"What's a mud lark?" I asked as I leaned out the compartment-door which the guard had so rudely slammed shut.

"That, Jo-Jo, is race-track slang," was Hugh's reply. "It means a horse that runs best on a bad track, that comes out first when the going is the heaviest."

"Then me for the mud!" I shouted back as we got under way. But two minutes later, when I realized I'd said good-by to everything I loved and had torn up the last roots of my life, I didn't look like a lady who had the rare and precious gift of comfortably capitalizing her adversities. I pretended to be reading *The Sphere*. But I was secretly wiping my nose with a very moist handkerchief.

And I had another bad hour, I may as well acknowledge, as we were pulling out of the harbor. It came home to me, for the first time, just what I was letting myself in for. I found myself in a mist of unreality, as though I had indeed changed my world in the Chinese meaning of the expression. There was no swell as yet to put the soft pedal on the high-tension hilarity of the Reverend Samuel's protégés, who divided their time between orange-eating and fag-smoking. And as we slipped past Cowes I remembered an earlier and happier occasion when I sat with Hugh and Aunt Allie and Tommy Carteret on Jocund Jerry's yacht-deck and

watched two snowy clouds known as the *Shamrock* and the *Britannia* slide side by side across the finishing-line opposite the Squadron Castle where the little brass cannon roared their salute along the sea-wall. I remembered sitting out on deck, too, with a perfect moon over the Solent and the soft June breeze bringing across the water to us the smell of new-mown hay mingled with the song of nightingales.

It made me feel, for a minute or two, like jumping overboard. But that, I had to remind myself, was neither the spirit of Nelson and Drake nor the procedure of mud larks. So I went down to my pulsing-floored cabin and opened the port-hole, so perilously close to the water-line, and let out a little of the cigarette smoke and took up my Rupert Brooke and read *Dawn* (from the train between Bologna and Milan, second-class) and *A Channel Passage* and felt much better. And that reminded me of the time when, in a Soho Restaurant, I'd once seen Rupert face to face and to my childish and adoring eyes he seemed much too beautiful to be eating a cold pork-and-mutton pie with his pint of bitter. But life, apparently, is like that.

Chapter Four

LAST night I dreamed that the Sultan of Morocco, after watching me dance in a Tangier coffee-house, ordered Joan Alicia Eustis to become a member of the royal harem. Which I did in fear and trembling, only to discover, to my infinite relief, that I was wanted merely as head narghile-lighter in a four-roomed palace that looked suspiciously like a prairie shack.

The sun, after four days of fog and rain, is shining again. And life seems less hopeless. I've been walking, wherever I can find a bit of clear deck, swayed by the Englishman's fixed passion to keep fit. And, now that we're finally approaching the sheltered waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, I've finally got my sea-legs, which is clearly a case of God giving us chestnuts when we no longer have teeth to crack them.

I've been trying to be a little more practical-minded, now that Charon has ferried me almost across, and a trifle more companionable with my fellow travelers, who are quick to resent any over-toffish aims at privacy. I even share an occasional gasper with them. They seem a pretty happy-go-lucky lot. They could never be accused of thinking too much. We suffer most, I imagine, when we look before and after and sigh for what is not. And it seems to save a lot of wear and tear when you're able to accept with an off-

handed smile a slap *au derrière* from a dirty-jacketed steward.

But I have problems of my own to face. Having said good-by to my Old World, I must get ready to face the New. And even though I may feel at times suspiciously like a passenger on that ghost-ship of Sutton Vane's in *Outward Bound*, without quite knowing whether I'm truly alive or dead, I've at least got an Examiner to face at the end of the trip.

So I've been putting out feelers. There's a cattle-rancher from Saskatchewan in our midst, I've found, and I've been plying him with questions about the Canadian West. He tells me the winters are so cold out in Alberta that the natives keep warm on seal-blubber. Even sound, he says, sometimes freezes up so hard you never hear it until it thaws out in the spring. He solemnly informed me that the frosts go fifteen feet deep and often heave the ranch-houses over and blizzards bury the farm-buildings in snow and the wolves sing you to sleep at night and the bears carry off your children by day. Then, seeing that I had grown sufficiently pop-eyed, he sat back and patted me on the knee.

"Say, girlie," he announced in a more serious tone of voice, "living out there on the lone prairie is just about the same as living anywhere else. People like it, you may be sure, or they wouldn't stay. And you can be as all-fired happy or as much the other way, out there, as you can be in Russell Square. It all depends

on the outlook. If you've got the horse-sense to accept conditions, and take the say-so of old-timers who've lived and learned, you'll get on fine. It's a great country. And I'd rather lope around the prairie on a good pinto than live in Buckingham Palace. And I've been colder in a Bloomsbury bedroom than I ever was in wind-swept Saskatchewan."

I felt better, after that. The Reverend Samuel, when he came down from second-class to conduct a Sunday-morning service for us, didn't seem quite so mendacious and mealy-mouthed. And I put my pride in my pocket and sat on a tarpaulin-draped hatch-cover with eleven of the Reverend Samuel's protégés hell-bent for married bliss. There I learned for the first time that instead of a party of twenty we were only eighteen, one bride-to-be having abruptly weakened on the quay at Southampton and another having been rejected as inconsiderately but incontestably *enceinte*. I also learned for the first time that a golden chance awaited some lucky damsel as yet undesignated, since the Reverend Samuel has arranged for one bride and groom to be married in the window of a Winnipeg department-store not inappropriately surrounded by a golden-oak suite of bedroom furniture, which becomes theirs immediately after the ceremony. But it won't be *me*. My mating-ceremony may not be so romantic as a Michael Arlen splicing in Mayfair, but I've no intention of entering the holy state of matrimony as an animated museum-specimen.

Aggie 'Athaway has also been telling me that the only way to get along with a man is not to 'igh-'at him. And I've been thinking that over. It obviously will never do to let my simple-hearted James think I'm trying to be a bit of a toff. I must swing in with the old-timers. I must never pretend to be better than he is. I'm a humble-born country girl, honest and of good character, anxious to be a 'elp to her consort. I am without mother or father—which is true enough—but I had a bit of schooling in my younger day and can do a little plain reading and writing, even though I do drop an occasional aitch. And while I can't milk cows or round up the bally range-steers or tan buffalo-ropes and chop stove-wood, I can sew and knit and do a bit of cooking and if need be ride 'orse-back to the village for a tin of paraffin.

I've been thinking, too, a great deal about James Bentley Gilson, and wondering what he will expect of me. From his picture, I fancy that he'll take me rather seriously. He will, I suppose, be one of those inarticulate sons of the soil who doesn't believe in books and music and table-talk. He's the silent sort, I take it, and he'll be a trifle awkward. But something tells me he won't be brutal. There's a melancholy gentleness about his wide-set eyes that I rather like. And that generously wide mouth of his may look a bit grim, but under the grimness is a patient sort of kindness. He may not know much about that ensemble of conventions called Society, but I don't think he'll

ever beat me with a bootjack. He looks rather hungry, as though he hadn't been getting the right things to eat. And he's rather honest; I imagine, and will demand honesty from his running-mate. So I must make my rôle a convincing one. And before I go any farther I must pitch overboard those two volumes of Proust that Hughie slipped into my bag. *Swann's Way* and dairymaids don't mix. And I must also commit to the deep my photograph of Lady Alicia on the Waterford Romper and that snap-shot of me and the Honorable Archie that Cousin Mavis took at Cumnor, with Archie's arm linked so possessively through mine that we look like two goods-wagons hitched together by a coupling-pin. My volume of Rupert Brooke I propose to keep with me, though before we get to Quebec I'm going to present my over-frivolous vanity-case to Miss Quennie Wilkins, late of Middle Wallop Farms, who has proudly shown me the sulphur-colored gloves and the ostrich-plumed hat with which she proposes to bowl over a possibly hesitant groom. For these are the things that must be tightly screwed down in their coffins. They can go without regret. I'm willing enough to step down off my high horse, if the situation demands it. But I'll burn in the hell of unrequited affection before I'll put woolen underthings next to my skin. It may not be the spirit of Nelson and Drake. But if I've got to take to woolen shifts and woolen stockings I'm going to retain a secret layer of silk between those woven sheep-hairs and my lily-white

body. I'm willing to be democratic: but there's no sense in being sadistic.

And, blimey, I've got to be less 'igh-'at in my lingo. I'll have to be ready to bust my Jamie one in the beak if he says I'm a lady. And I'll sanguinary soon show him, if he's given to eating audibly, that I'm willing to turn dining into a duet. I may know I'm ruddy well right, but I'll never blow the gaff. I'll be as 'umble as Aggie 'Athaway believes the lordly male demands. My friend the cattle-rancher from Saskatchewan tells me that the English are the worst grouzers on the face of the globe. But I'll show him. I'm a human olive-branch. I'm a worm. And now that I'm on the toboggan, as my cattle-rancher friend expresses it, nothing can stop me. I've made my bed and I've got to lie in it. And crazy as it may seem, I want to make a go of it. I'm going to do my darnedest to make James Bentley Gilson like me. He may not have a sink in his kitchen, but he must, after all, be a person of enterprise and some small importance back in his own riding, or he would never have got the gold medal and his picture in the papers for growing the best wheat in the province. And I want him to like me. I don't want to be a flop.

But I can't help wondering if my Jamie is thinking of me and counting the days until he meets me in Calgary. I wonder, too, if in his idle moments he is speculating as to what I'm like and whether or not he has picked a lemon. Perhaps, after all, he won't cotton

to me. Perhaps, when he sees me, he'll politely send me home again. I refuse, however, to cross that bridge until I come to it. But, as I sit and look at Jamie's photograph, it comes over me in rather a dizzy little wave of wonder that this is the man who, before another week is gone, is going to be my legal and lawful husband, the man I must live with, the man I must belong to, the man I must try to understand and love. It makes me gulp a little. But I shake hands with the ghost of Nelson and refuse to give up the ship.

Chapter Five

CANADA looks like a scarletina patient. And all Canadians are red-haired, have adenoids, and talk through their noses. That, at least, was my initial impression of the Land of the Maple Leaf. For the autumn hills were a fiery red. And both the Customs Officer and the Immigration official who came aboard at Father Point were distinctly carrotty as to complexion and as distinctly nasal as to intonation.

But, like most newcomers, I generalized too soon. For I'm finally aboard one of those big Canadian limited expresses that make our home trains seem rather like squealing little toys, and I'm being whirled across a strange new world. Yet I'm glad to be alone again, after all the hurly-burly of landing and being inspected and passing customs and being reminded that I was once more merely a member of a chain-gang, to say nothing of having my good English money changed into those foolish-looking Canadian bills and having to wait for hours in a gloomy-looking shed surrounded by bundle-carrying Slovaks and Ruthenians and Bulgarians punctuated with crying babies.

I felt, as we steamed up the St. Lawrence and the sun shone so benignantly clear from a high-arching sky of cobalt-blue, that my first happy glimpse of the New World was in the nature of a good omen. I was a

trifle over-awed by the bigness of the St. Lawrence, and the beauty of the north bank almost took my breath away. The autumn frosts had stained the leaves on the wooded slopes of the Laurentians with color, and they were one long panorama of crimson and orange and gold, with patchwork oblongs of umber and green closer to the river where the farms were, and home-like little white villages presided over by church-spires that glinted silver in the clear Canadian sunlight.

But the glory didn't last long. And the harbor made by man was much less lovely than the hills made by God. And there was no telegram for me, as I had half expected. And I declined to be photographed in that grotesque and giggling line of volunteer brides, and the Reverend Samuel and I had it out to a finish, right in the immigration-shed, and I refused to travel in a colonist-car and sleep on a bed of wooden slats. By paying a little over three pounds I was transferred to a later train and permitted to travel "Tourist," which means I have sheets on my bed and a porter to make it up and an environment a little more to my liking. I'll miss the dropped aitches and orange-peel, the Jockey-Club scent and the gaspers and the elaborated recountals of erotic adventures and the wrangles over who's wearing whose underwear and the companionable aroma of plump and unwashed bodies. For I've parted, for good, with my lilac-blossom pals. I'm alone here, and not altogether sorry for it, even though

the wildness of the country over which we are flying has given me a pang or two of homesickness.

The rest of the group, I'm told, are to receive considerable attention from both the press and the public, with donations of neatly packed dinner-baskets tied with white ribbon from the divers urban centers through which they journey on their way to *sub-jugum* felicity. They'll be, apparently, the cynosure of all eyes, though woman's inalienable reputation for mutability has been confirmed by none other than the ample-bosomed Queenie Wilkins of Middle Wallop Farms, who abruptly declined to travel on to the arms of her duly appointed mate and accepted an offer of marriage from a bibulous steam-fitter returning to Three Rivers.

I'm glad enough to be out of it all, to be alone once more and able to arrange my thoughts. But odd little moods of depression keep coming over me as I realize how far away I am, as I sit here, from any mortal soul who gives a tinker's dam whether I'm alive or dead. I wonder if the Wentringer clan is thinking about me as they have tea about their jolly open fire this afternoon and if they know I'm being parboiled in a long-aisled tourist-car with double-glassed windows and hissing steam-pipes and a plump black-robed priest fast asleep in the seat across from me? I wonder if Leslie Foraker knows that I'm over five thousand miles away from Bournemouth and its Overcliff Drive and chines and hopelessly fantastic villas with frugal gas fires and mysteriously secreted ladies in their bed-

rooms? And I wonder if Hughie was telling me the truth when he so thickly proclaimed that he'd jolly well have married me right there in Midhurst if we hadn't happened to be first cousins? Poor old Hugh. It's a good thing he doesn't know just what I've been through these last two weeks. And England is such a tight little island, so self-contained and satisfied with its own way of doing things. We're so incredibly sure of ourselves. And foreigners, we airily contend, are mostly fools. But how little we know about our Dominions, the size of the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence and the Falls of Montmorenci and Niagara, the northern Ontario pinelands that could swallow half a dozen English counties whole, this boundless new world with all its new hopes and questions and queer ways of doing things, and this blazing, electrifying American sunlight that makes thirty shillings a week and afternoon tea seem rather silly.

But it's not all sunlight. For we've just ridden into a snowsquall that turned all the world white and put a coating of goosefeathers on the burnt-over forest and rock-ridges through which we're twining. And we've just passed a lonely little wooden station with a boxed coffin standing on the carrier's lorry at one end of the platform, though a jolly enough group of deer-hunters, with guns and grub-bags and plaid-and-leather jackets, waved at us from the other end of the same platform. But I've decided not to think about the past. I'm English, and I'm proud of it. I love the land of my

birth. We English, I'm told, are always parading our bones and powwowing about Yesterday. But this is the New World, the Land of To-morrow, the Land of Youth and Hope. And I'm going to be a part of it. I'm going to learn to chew gum and eat grapefruit for breakfast and the difference between two-bob and half-a-dollar and the lingual value of the letter *r* in every-day speech and why coaches are cars and porridge is cereal and luggage is baggage and Englishmen are known as sparrows. Me for the great open spaces and the happier days to come!

For I'm on my way again, after two hours in what they call the Threshold City and the Chicago of Canada. We've left the land of lakes and forests and rock-ridges far behind us and are on the real prairie, almost as flat as the ocean floor, with homesteads and silos and windmills and fences and plowed fields and far-off plumes of smoke where, they tell me, the farmers are burning their wheat-straw after threshing. The untilled soil is not green, as it must have been in summer, but dun-colored, like a lion's back. And the ranchers' homes look rather lonely, so far apart on this flattened-out floor of the world where the sky-line stretches from east to west as level as a windless sea.

At Winnipeg I talked with a kind-eyed woman at the Traveler's Aid Desk and she advised me to send a telegram to my silence-immured Jamie at Elk Crossing, which, on studying the map, she discovered to be a considerable distance from Calgary. If Jamie was with-

out a rural phone, she explained, some grain-hauling good Samaritan would probably carry the message out to him. And I should be sure to see about my license. And I should dress more warmly for the prairie, and should have overshoes, and not feel discouraged if the first few weeks seemed a bit lonely. And I should get in touch with the official whose name was presented to me surrounded by a lugubrious black lead-pencil circle, in case there should be any hitch in the proceedings.

Well, there was no hitch, apparently, about the goldfish wedding in the show-window. For I've been studying, in the Winnipeg paper I brought along with me, a picture of the happy bride and groom surrounded by their suite of golden-oak. It looks indescribably cheap and silly. And I pray to God my Jamie will have the discernment to keep this sordid enterprise from ending up in a riot of sordidness. These are the occasions, after all, when women demand some redeeming touch of glamour. I may be booked as a sort of catch-as-catch-can bride, but I do hope there can be a little dignity in the manner of going under the yoke, a brighter memory or two of my farewell to freedom. There is one thing, at any rate, that I have most definitely decided on. If I don't like the looks of James Bentley Gilson, when I step out of this coach at Calgary, if my instinct tells me that he's not the man for me and I'm not the woman for him, I'm going to say "Good-by and good luck!" and walk calmly but determinedly out of his taurine presence, even though I

have to wash crockery dishes in a railway restaurant to keep body and soul together. As I've written here once before, I don't want to be a flop. But I'm something more than an animal. And if my Jamie can't recognize that fact we may as well part at the beginning.

I have, not unnaturally, been giving a great deal of thought to this matter of marriage. For mating, with us Anglo-Saxons, is still an intensely personal and supposedly romantic affair. We have despised the marriage of convenience, so approved of by our neighbors across the channel, and demanded "a reciprocating high-tension emotional propulsion," as my linguistic Leslie once phrased it, before taking the plunge. We're more apt to call it a sacrament than a social contract, even though we do find it more of a discipline than a life-long delight. For the rhapsody doesn't always seem to last. And even high passion, I've found, isn't always accompanied by considerate manners. My situation is an exceptional one, of course, and it may be a case of sour grapes. But I've fully decided not to be sentimental about this question of wedlock. I may not be a twentieth-century Helen of Troy. But men seem to like me. I'm intelligent and have had a fair amount of social training. And I intend to be adaptable. If I have to face the problem of adjusting my personality to the undeciphered personality of an utterly unknown man, there's at least going to be high adventure in that encounter. If my Jamie tries to kiss me, when I get off this train, I shall slay him where he stands.

Chapter Six

THERE never is much to your thirteenth oyster, as some sage has observed. And Browning was right: your reach should exceed your grasp, or what's the use?

For here I am, rather swamped under too many new sensations. So much has happened, in fact, that I scarcely know where and how to begin.

But the important item, now that the fogs of unreality begin to fade away, is that I'm actually *here*. Here in a prairie shack little bigger than Grunting Georgie's shooting-box in Scotland, with a fire glowing comfortably through the stove-front and nothing but the singing of a rather rusty iron kettle to break the silence. And I may as well, I take it, bow to the established practise, and begin where most sane people begin, which is at the beginning.

I'm here, it's true, but there was a time when I didn't expect to be. For after our train finally pulled in at Calgary, on a clear and diamond-like morning that made the low-lying peaks of the Rockies along the western sky-line look like Queen Mary's tiara stretched out a good half-hundred miles, I had rather a bad moment or two. I'd been telling myself that I was going to be as cool as a cucumber about it all. But I hadn't been able to sleep and was glad enough to get out of my curtain-draped cubby-hole of a berth. I emerged, in

fact, at a foolishly early hour, though it gave me a swaying little washroom all to myself and there I bathed very much as a cat bathes and made a cramped but leisured toilet. I might not be showy, but I proposed to be clean. Then I went through to the dining-car and ate as ample a breakfast as seemed consistent with a lady whose total patrimony amounted to exactly seventy-nine pounds, telling myself, as I ate, that it might be my last happy meal on this clouded globe of uncertainties.

But I wasn't so placid-minded as I pretended. The temperature in the coach must have been about eighty, although ridiculous little shivers kept going up and down my back-bone as I repacked my bulging telescope and put on my hat and gloves and for the thirteenth time powdered my nose. My hands began to shake, as we slowed up for the Calgary station. And that, I had to remind myself, was not the spirit of Nelson and Drake. I was, after all, a free and independent white woman, and not an Arabian slave-girl being sold into never-ending harem captivity. And I had to be something more than a spineless dab of mortar on a plasterer's hawk. So I stiffened my shoulders, set my jaw and did my best to breathe deep.

Then my heart, the next minute, plainly qualified for the Caterpillar Club by taking a chute-drop, for a huge-framed and funny-looking man came down the coach-aisle, most unmistakably paging *me*. My first craven impulse was to disavow any association with the

Reverend Samuel Dollard and his travel-dazed Number Nineteen. For the eager-eyed one confronting me wore a moth-eaten cowhide coat and a ragged and drooping mustache that looked exactly like the bow-ends of shredded rope with which harbor-tugs are adorned. All I'd hooked, I told myself, was a human walrus. But when I'd duly acknowledged myself, in a weak and quavering voice, I found that the walrus-faced man was not my Jamie, but merely a messenger from my mysteriously absent lord-and-master. "Big Jim," it seems, was not able to come all the way in to Calgary, on account of having to look after his live stock, but if I would take the noon train out to Elk Crossing he would be there with a team and rig to meet me.

This didn't look any too encouraging. A man who put his pigs and cows above a forlorn-hearted bride who'd traveled seven or eight thousand long miles to place her destiny in his calloused rustic paws rather failed to impress me as a knightly and considerate groom. And that rather got my English up. But I swallowed my grief as I wandered about the streets and shops of Calgary, waiting for my branch-line train. And I decided to see the thing out to the bitter end. Calgary, I found, was a clean and bustling foot-hill city, on a little river of heavenly blue, half-way between the prairie and the mountains, with sky-scrapers and big shops and a hillside or two of lordly homes, with an occasional cowboy in chaps and a few copper-skinned

Indians trudging along the granolithic sidewalks, to remind me it wasn't so far from the frontier of civilization. There were a dozen and one things I was tempted to buy in the shops. But I mastered that impulse, reminding myself that I didn't yet know which way the cat was going to jump.

Going out to Elk Crossing, oddly enough, I was as composed and quiet as a clam. I'd pretty well emptied my bag of emotion. I'd shot, I fancy, my last bolt of feeling. I had reached a deadly sort of indifference that left me torpid and yet terribly wide-awake. I was telling myself, as we pulled into Elk Crossing, that I was merely the silly and helpless pawn in a Canadian railway's silly advertising enterprise. I even wondered if there was an afternoon train back to Calgary.

And when I stepped out on that bald wooden platform, with a clutter of boxes and agricultural implements at the end of the goods shed, I found no Jamie there to meet me. He wasn't there, at least, for an indescribably desolate minute or two. For Jamie's two piebald horses, it seems, didn't approve of the train, and had to be held down by the bit-rings until our snorting monster of an engine had rumbled off again.

But I knew, even before that lanky steed-tamer crossed back to the platform steps, that it was Jamie. He was in a rather shabby-looking wolf-skin coat and even shabbier fur gauntlets and a rather foolish-looking black bowler that impressed me as something frugally saved for funerals and other equally auspicious oc-

casions. He was younger-looking than I had expected. And taller and gaunter and more hungry-looking. And plainly embarrassed and ill-at-ease and *gauche*, for he stopped in front of me, half-way up the steps, and seemed very much in doubt as to what to do or say.

But I'll never forget, as long as I live, that look of his. He stood two steps lower than me, so that our faces were about on a level. And a pair of dark and solemn eyes stared into mine as intently as though he were trying to see right down through me and read the numbers stamped on my shoe-instepts.

I waited, with my heart in my mouth, to see some hardening frown of disapproval on that intent brown face that made me think more than ever of a youngish-looking Abraham Lincoln. Instead of frowning, however, he slowly pulled off his old fur gauntlet and held out his hand. Then he said quietly, but in a rather husky and quavery voice: "*Welcome home.*"

It wasn't much, after all, but I could feel my breathing apparatus start to pump again.

"Welcome home," when you come to think of it, are two lovely words, two comforting and meaningful and dignified words than can fold like feathered wings about a chilled and hesitating heart. They seemed to drive the last nail in the coffin-lid of my doubts. They almost made me forget how much I hated that foolish-looking bowler. I put my hand in Jamie's and felt his big bony fingers close about it. And I knew I wasn't going to wait for the afternoon train back to Calgary.

Chapter Seven

THAT solid enough station-platform, as I stood facing that strange man in the wolf-skin coat, began to heave and rock like the deck of a liner. And the natural thing to do, in my moment of dizziness, was to reach out one hand and steady myself against the fur-covered arm in front of me. I felt very small beside the towering James—and also very helpless.

"Will I do, Jamie?" I asked in an unexpectedly weak and quavery voice.

He laughed, rather grimly, and once more studied my face.

"The question is, will I?" he said in his cavernous big voice that had such an odd undertone of melancholy. And it was a question I couldn't answer, at the moment, for in spite of all my fine resolutions I found the tears trickling down my nose and a lump in my throat that refused to be swallowed. And there I stood, leaning against a horsy-smelling stranger in a wolf-skin coat, a stranger I'd never seen until that minute, clinging to his bear-like arm and dripping brine on his gauntlet.

He plainly didn't know what to do.

"It's all right," he rather thickly and inadequately assured me, with a glance over his shoulder at his increasingly restless team. "It's all right."

I felt better, in a moment or two, and could mop my eyes dry and furtively speculate as to the redness of my nose.

"I was struck all of a 'eap," I explained in belated remembrance of my lowly origin.

He glanced at me quickly, and frowned over that dropped aitch.

"I intended to get in to Calgary," he explained as he looked for the first time at my clothes, from hat to shoes. "But an early frost out here burst my car-radiator. And team-travel, of course, would have meant a whole day away from my stock. And I suppose it's been like hell on wheels getting out here?"

"You're worth it, Jamie," I wanted to say. But I didn't have the courage. There was something detached and meditative about the bony face under the funereal-looking bowler-brim that was beginning to disappoint me. He was, apparently, already thinking about far-off things, wondering, probably, if his homestead heifers and pigs were behaving, the way well-brought-up heifers and pigs ought to behave. I didn't exactly expect him to execute a can-can on that station platform. But I was hoping that we might in some way climb a little higher up the tottering ladder of ecstasy. Perhaps, after all, he felt that he had been given a blank in the big lottery. And even his horses didn't seem, at the moment, to approve of my presence.

"Have you had anything to eat?" he rather curtly inquired.

"I 'ad a bite o' breakfast on the train," I dutifully informed him.

He shook his head, over that, and said we'd have to stoke up. But he winced, I noticed, over my dropped aspirate. He even subjected my person to another quick and frowning inspection.

"Can you read?" he abruptly demanded. And it came home to me, for the first time, how abysmally ignorant this man stood of me and my background.

"A little," I meekly responded. If I'd been a horse, I remembered, he might have been a trifle quicker in sizing up my good and bad points.

"And write?" he asked, with an unnecessarily stoical look on his face.

Yes, I told him, I could do a little plain writing, though I didn't 'appen to be always sure of my spelling. He sighed, without quite knowing it, but squared his shoulders for all the world like a man determined to make the best of a bad bargain.

"Have you the check for this trunk?" he asked with a head-nod toward my humble and heavily corded box of horsehide, which a sagacious station-agent, quite unknown to me, had rolled to within six paces of where we stood. And the issue, I surmised, was finally decided. Whether peach or lemon, James Bentley Gilson was actually going to condescend to keep me, even though I wasn't as *hochwohlgeboren* as he expected.

"Blimey if I 'aven't," I said in blinking answer to his question about the claim-check. I knew it would

be altogether perilous and out of place, but some wayward back-wash of recklessness made me want to laugh. I wanted to laugh, yet I had to bite my lower lip, to keep it from trembling.

"You don't know much about me, do you?" I said to Jamie when he came back from delivering the claim-check.

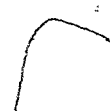
"No more than you know about *me*," he observed, defensively enough, as he shouldered the big trunk and carried it over to his funny four-wheeled trap that looked so sadly in need of a hostler's sponge and chamois. I realized, from the easy and offhand way in which he swung that trunk about and roped it to the back of his mud-covered carriage, that he was tremendously strong.

"I've been having a little trouble about getting our license forms filled out," he said as he came back for my bag.

"Oh," was my non-committal comment, remembering as I did the Traveler's Aid lady's advice about the importance of not overlooking the benefit-of-clergy part of the arrangement. *Sunt pueri pueri!*

"But we'll soon straighten that out," Jamie casually announced as he cramped the trap-wheel, so I could climb aboard and cover my none too steady knees with a big and mangy-looking blanket of fur which, I later discovered, was known as a buffalo-robe.

"That's nice," I said with a reciprocal show of matter-of-factness. For I was beginning to feel, after



all, uncomfortably like a marked-down bargain picked up from a market-barrow.

"This is a pretty good town," he said as he tooled his team out of the open and unfenced station-yard. He said it proudly but he was seeking protection, I felt, in the impersonal. And I also felt, as I looked rather wearily about, that human beings are hopeless dunder-heads. They could be so shrinking and timid and craven and guarded when a few honest words might throw open the road to happiness. And the metropolis of Elk Crossing didn't strike me as very inspiring. It was like a great many other prairie towns I'd seen from my coach-window, a row of wooden-fronted shops along a main street lined with untidy-looking motor-cars, a scattering of modest enough frame houses that thinned out as they reached the edge of the open prairie, and everything bathed in a bald and revealing wash of white sunlight that had a tendency to make the eyes ache. But I had a bigger ache, I knew, somewhere in the neighborhood of my floating ribs.

I did my best to keep a stiff upper lip as we dismounted from our muddy rattletrap and faced the ordeal of our first meal together. It was a rather awful meal, all things considered, in a smelly wooden-fronted restaurant conducted by a fat and insolent-eyed Chinaman who greeted my consort's request for a quiet table with an apathetic "Velly well, Blig Jim." And Big Jim, as he seemed to be called in that neighborhood, explained that he usually ate at Ten Lung's when he

teamed into town. Just why he did so remained a bit of mystery to me. For instead of quietness we had a clatter of crockery dishes and instead of music we had a flotilla of belated flies buzzing about our table. There were gravy spots on the table-cloth and congealed tomato-sauce about the oft-handled neck of the catsup-bottle. And my consort, I found when he emerged from his wolf-skin top-coat, was clad in a rusty black suit with what looked like splashes of pancake-batter down the front of it. He wore a boiled shirt and a highly starched white collar, which made him look less than ever like an open-throated hero of the western range. And I cursed the cinemas of the great open spaces for so leading me astray.

Master James Bentley Gilson must have read disapproval on my face, for he proceeded, when food was placed before us, to eat stubbornly and silently. I can't say that he ate barbarously. But there was a rural downrightness in the way in which he attacked that badly cooked meal. He had no intention, apparently, of wasting time on small talk. And he didn't seem to care much, as I sat there with a railway cinder in my eye and the familiar old ache just under my wish-bone, whether I was happy or miserable. So I decided, eventually, that if he was going to stay in his shell that way I could do the same. I went at my meal with a silent sort of savagery that brought his slightly bewildered eyes about to me for a couple of times. And in a spirit of feminine protest against male oppression

in general I deliberately left my German-silver spoon in my coffee-cup.

But I felt better after I had stoked up, as Big Jim had so elegantly phrased it. I even achieved the courage to ask my companion if he could find the cinder in my eye. And this, after a manifest moment of doubt, he proceeded to do. He had to sit quite close to me, with my knees between his, as he gazed frowningly into my eye and searched for the intruding mote. It seemed to be hard work, for he breathed heavily and for some obscure reason underwent a perceptible change of color. But he was unexpectedly gentle about it, for all the bigness of his hands, when he finally located the cinder and lifted it away on the twisted-up corner of my hankie. He surprised me, in fact, by stooping down and carefully brushing off a tear or two of irritation that adorned my lashes. But he didn't, as a more discerning man or two had done before that day, softly murmur that I had most lovely eyes. He merely queried, "That's better, isn't it?" and handed me back my hankie. And I solemnly announced that it was much better.

But once we had left the cryptically smiling Ten Lung behind us, I noticed that my Jamie wasn't as placid-minded as he pretended. I'd wanted a fag, for the last hour, more than anything else in the world. But I'd deemed it best, for rather undefined reasons, not to smoke in the presence of my affianced. So I had to wait silent while Jamie awkwardly filled a Wel-

lington brier and even more awkwardly lighted it and looked at his securely tied team and glanced up at the sun and hesitated and then turned to where I demurely awaited my lord-and-master's will.

"I suppose," he said with altogether protective grimness, "we'd better be taking the high dive."

I didn't know what he meant. And my eyes must have said so, for I could see the color darken in his already dark-skinned face.

"We're going to get married," he proclaimed. And he said it as grimly as though he were a headsman telling a Lady Jane Grey that she was going to the block.

I don't know why I was prompted to bolt. But for one wild moment I nursed a desire to emulate the humble barnyard fowl and still give James Bentley Gilson a run for his money. By the time we had started down the street, however, that guardian instinct which lies across the door-step of every woman's soul opened one drowsy eye and stretched in his sleep. It was no time, I remembered, to trifle with manifest destiny.

"I came a-purpose," I said with an effort at levity that fell dolefully short of the mark.

"I know," said the lordly James, not entirely without the note of a Horatius who, however dark the outlook, was still resolved to hold the bridge.

"'Ow do we do it?" I meekly inquired.

"There's a Methodist parson waiting for us over in

the next block," announced my Jamie. "And you mustn't drop your aitches."

"I'm sorry," I told him, without daring to look up.

"That's all right," he condoningly responded as he looked at his watch and then took off a gauntlet to feel reassuringly in the depths of his waistcoat pocket. "You look cold."

"I am a bit chilled, in a manner of speaking," I answered, more truthfully than he imagined.

"We've first got to go back to the jeweler's and fill out our licenses," explained Jamie.

"Why to the jeweler's?" I asked, wondering if, after all, I was to be reckoned as something above rubies.

"Because the jewelers in this country kill two birds with one stone. They sell you the license as well as the wedding-ring."

Jamie's phrasing wasn't exactly Chesterfieldian, but I forgot about it in the excitement of filling out my form, which I did to the accompaniment of several dozen busily ticking clocks. And then we headed for the parsonage, where Jamie solemnly and blinkingly piloted me up a narrow cement walk toward a gaunt and ungainly two-story frame house that in some way made me think of an overgrown calf.

Then, when we were in the parlor confronting the parson, we were reminded that we had come without witnesses. So the required two witnesses were brought in from the back of the house, one a meek-eyed and heavily aproned housekeeper whose mind, obviously,

was still on her kitchen-oven and the other a gangling schoolgirl of about seventeen whose chief interest, at the moment, lay in watching a dog-fight taking place just outside the parlor-window.

It was, I suppose, just about as crazy a wedding-service as a woman ever went through. Not one flower, not one note of music, not one casual and unconsidered glimmer of splendor or suspicion of grandeur. Just a stuffy little parlor with red and brown plush furniture and a group of children rowing outside in the hall and a smell of cabbage boiling at the back of the house, while I felt my heart pounding against my ribs as a big-boned and obviously embarrassed wheat-grower with none too steady hands stood telling a shabby and somewhat obese stranger with an asthmatic manner of breathing that he was willing to endow me with all his worldly goods and cherish me in sickness and in health.

It was hot, and the ring was too big for my finger, and my knees were a bit unsteady under me, and instead of kissing me, when it was all over, the groom took out what looked like a brand-new plaid handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his preoccupied brow. And I wished to heaven that I was Emily Ann back in her capacious and well-scrubbed English kitchen or an empty-minded nurse-maid at twelve pounds a year tooling a perambulator about the paths of Kensington Gardens.

But I felt better when we were out in the air again,

though I found it hard to believe that I was now Joan Alicia Gilson, the legally wedded wife of the tall and rather tired-looking stranger who strode beside me in a musky-smelling wolf-skin overcoat that gave him the appearance of something recently transferred from the Neolithic Age. I felt vaguely cheated and cheapened. The ceremony had been bad enough, but my husband wasn't even trying to hold my hand. He merely observed, as we went about doing a bit of shopping, that we had a long drive home ahead of us. So I shut my teeth on my misery and was politely attentive as a meager amount of sheets and towels and tinware was hesitatingly purchased. I didn't even smile when my Jamie, not without an implication all its own, bought me a double-layered box of toilet soap, to say nothing of a two-pound carton of indurated sweets that at some time in their long and checkered career must have reposed cheek-by-jowl with a paraffin-tin.

My husband—how solemn I feel as I inscribe those purposeful words!—even stopped and asked me if I could think of anything else we ought to be taking out to the ranch with us.

"Let's buy a pound or two of rice," I suggested.

"What for?" asked the frowning Jamie.

"To throw over-ourselves," I exclaimed.

But the moment I'd said it I was sorry. For I knew no man likes a sharp-tongued and sarcastic woman.

Perhaps that's why Jamie was so quiet on our long, long drive home.

We went pounding and teetering over a hard-beaten prairie-trail until I was half afraid we'd come to the end of the world and drop off in the darkness. For the sun went down, in a lonely flood of gold, and the gold turned to orange and then to ashes-of-roses and then to opal and mother-of-pearl.

I sat close to Jamie, and yet I felt very far away from him. It seemed very lonesome, bowling along that empty and endless trail. And suddenly the evening quietness was ruptured by a prolonged and mournful and altogether mysterious yodeling.

"What's that?" I asked, chilled by an answering wail, higher-pitched than the first.

"Those are prairie warblers," explained the grimly smiling James. "And you'll hear a good many of 'em."

"What are prairie warblers?" I inquired, watching the last band of rose-flushed light die out along the west.

"Coyotes," answered Jamie, with a sharp word or two to his tired team.

And still we bowled along that hard-packed road.

"Those are funny-looking horses," I said in a brave effort to make a bit of talk.

"Those are mighty fine horses," averred my indignant husband.

Well, they might be, I decided, but their good points were certainly well concealed.

I sat silent again, as the prairie grew still darker and

the stars came out and the scattered lights of the ranch-houses looked very far off and lonely. Far off and lonely and brave. It grew colder, as night came on, and I was glad enough to feel the warmth of my Jamie's big body close beside me.

I couldn't jump down his throat, but when I began to feel tired I leaned cautiously and sleepily against his shoulder. He stooped forward and looked into my face. Seeing me apparently asleep, he took the reins in his right hand, hesitated a moment, and then held up my swaying body with his otherwise disengaged left arm. I swung there in his lupine clasp, silent and inert, until we turned off the main trail and went through a movable gap in a stretch of barb-wire and rumbled over a little wooden bridge and followed a narrower path that led up to a low-roofed house that stood dark and shadowy in the uncertain light. From somewhere behind it came a low and whining sound, which I later discovered was made by a windmill wheel moving languidly in the night-breeze. And from an even more shadowy building, somewhere off in the distance, I could hear a cavalier knicker or two. And I could hear the pound of hoofs on stall flooring and the bleating of hungry calves. And I felt like bleating myself, hollow as I was with a well-earned and honorable hunger born of almost twenty miles of swaying and bumping through frosty air.

I heard that brand-new husband of mine say, "Wait here," and say it in a manner which I regarded as al-

together too proprietary. But he tucked me up again in the buffalo-robe, and did it so carefully, that I was satisfied to sit there while he unhitched his tired and knickering team. He must have been familiar with every buckle and strap, for he did it all in the dark. He even disappeared entirely, after the cart pole had fallen with a clang to the already frozen ground, and, being a good farmer, I took it for granted that he was stabling and feeding his horses. Then, instead of leading me ceremoniously into the house, he once more left me wrapped up in my buffalo-robe, and disappeared through the shack door.

I thought, as I sat contemplating the stars, that he had already undergone a man-like change of heart and had decided to shut me for ever out of his life. But all he was doing, apparently, was hurrying in to light a lamp and touch a match to a fire already laid in the stove. For after I'd seen the black window-squares turn orange and a spark or two go up from the chimney-top Jamie came solemnly out and helped me down from my cart-seat.

"You mustn't expect too much," he hesitatingly warned me. But I could see, once we were inside, that he was rather proud of his shack. It had been slicked up exactly as a preoccupied man would slick up a place. It looked patchily clean and fresh-scrubbed, and the supper-table, promisingly enough, had been laid for two. There was even a pathetic little cluster of dried bulrushes and fox-grass in a thri'-

penny green glass vase. But I couldn't enthuse. I noticed that there were no curtains on the windows and no shade on the lamp and no ghostly shadow of that daintiness which every woman of civilization seems to demand in her surroundings.

I was, though, too tired to pay much attention to things. I'd been swatting a little harder than I realized. I was even too tired to eat, hungry as I'd fancied myself to be. I felt, as I sat there, more and more like Mary Queen of Scots at Fotheringay, waiting to be led into the hall of execution. I didn't even have the courage to reach for a cigarette. Jamie, I felt, might object to the filthy weed. He might not like his newly minted bride with tobacco-smoke in her hair. He didn't, I'd already observed, quite approve of the sheerness of my stockings and he had most unmistakably smiled at my tennis-racket. But I couldn't have argued about it. The gift of words, in fact, seemed to have evaporated from my twitching and mutely protesting body.

It was all wrong, I know, but I felt better when Jamie left me alone there, explaining that he had his stock to look after and his chores to finish up. When he came back, in due time, and went through some mysterious rites with two big pails of milk, and slipped the bolt in the house-door behind him, my heart once more started doing things under my floating ribs. I was on the point of rather foolishly announcing that I'd like to take a long, long walk on the open prairie,

when Jamie looked at me with those solemnly estimative brown eyes of his.

"I'm afraid you're tired out," he said after a moment of none too happy silence. Then he slowly got up and went over to wind the nickel alarm-clock on the end of the dish-cupboard.

"I—I like watching the fire," I temporized, wondering if Socrates could have felt any worse when he'd reached for his cup of hemlock.

But Jamie must have seen the terror and horror and funk in my eyes. For he casually observed as he closed up the front of the stove: "I guess I'll bunk in the Barracks to-night."

The Barracks, I've since found out, is a half-empty storeroom at the far end of the shack. And to bunk, apparently, meant to sleep or repose. So I was able to breathe again. I felt, though, terribly like a murderer confronted with a last-minute reprieve. I wanted to cry, I'm afraid. But instead of tears I merely emitted a thin and quavery, "Good night."

Jamie didn't so much as give me a look over his shoulder.

"Good night," he said as he walked solemnly out. And he had to undress and go to bed there, I've since discovered, in the utter darkness.

Chapter Eight

JAMES BENTLEY GILSON isn't happy. And I suppose I'm the cause of his misery. He doesn't say so, but I'm most unmistakably a disappointment to him. I can see a frustrated look in that smoldering brown eye of his. He seems constrained and brooding and abstracted. His gaze, when I speak to him, seems to come back from a great distance. And his face hardened, perceptibly, when he noticed that I wasn't wearing my wedding-ring, which was so big that it kept falling off. But I've been wrapping its inner curve with cotton string, to make it fit, for Jamie must have thought that he was mating with a lady Hercules. And rings, like dispositions, must sometimes be adjusted.

The Big Adventure, however, doesn't seem to have started off any too auspiciously. I'm still sitting tight, waiting for Destiny to disclose itself. And inspecting this outland beach where I was so improvidently washed ashore.

I'll never, I fancy, forget my first morning on this ranch. I woke up wondering where I was, mystified by the whining of a windmill and the innumerable farm noises that were faintly suggestive of a zoo. I couldn't, for the life of me, quite place myself. I couldn't understand why ducks were squabbling and a light-

hearted rooster was crowing so noisily just outside my window. And I failed to fathom why there should be such a horsy smell to my bed, and how I happened to be sleeping in a room that looked like a cross between a box-stall and the picture-album of a feeble-minded child.

And then I remembered. And having oriented myself, I lay there appraising my surroundings. The two outer walls of the room, I found, had been lined with building-paper, neatly enough tacked to the unpainted pine boards. On this had been pasted pictures cut from magazines and Sunday papers, a constellation of cinema queens surrounded by a Milky Way of less resplendent ladies and altogether unrelated events, from the launching of battle-ships to the Prince of Wales tumbling off a riding-horse at Melton Mowbray. From pegs on the inside wall hung a distinctly masculine pair of overalls, much the worse for wear, a soiled collar from which still dangled a twisted necktie, and a broad-brimmed felt hat which looked as though it had come out of the Ark. In the corner stood a shotgun, an ax-handle, and a pair of rubber boots that obviously had traversed a barnyard on a wet and soggy day. Along the end wall was a shelf, none too even, which held a row of books, the stub of a candle in the wax-furrowed neck of a bottle, an empty tobacco-tin, and a cardboard box half full of odds-and-ends, from harness buckles and a bottle of seed wheat to roofing nails and a ball of darning wool.

Not far from the head of the bed stood a wash-stand, made of an inverted wooden box with legs nailed to its corners, covered with worn oilcloth and on the wall beside it was a razor-strop and a rather fly-blown looking-glass with a forked-lightning crack zigzagging from corner to corner. Over the back of a chair, with a defective fourth leg, hung a man's shirt oddly patched and faded. On the floor the stiff and untanned pelts of two black-and-white calves did duty as rugs. And my eczematous bed, I noticed, supported a pair of springs about as humped as a dromedary, serving to make the equally humped mattress more than ever like a relief-map of the Tyrolian Alps. And the horsey smell, I finally discovered, arose from the undebatable fact that one of my bed-coverings had at no remote time been used as a saddle-blanket. The horsehairs, in fact, were still there to prove it.

That room rather depressed me. But as I lay there, winding up the watch of my courage, so to speak, I noticed the sunlight that was streaming in through the cobweb-draped window. It seemed jolly and hopeful, strong and bright. And from it I seemed to gather strength. Even the prairie air, when I swung open the window, had a sweet and winey tang to it. It revived my drooping spirits exactly as fresh-water in a rose-vase revives a drooping Jacquemot. I felt suddenly big and brave. I was a daughter of the steppes, where men are men and life is cast in a larger mold.

But my own particular man, I found when I emerged

from my room, was nowhere about. I suspected, at first, that he'd flown the coop overnight. But from the open door I saw him perched high on a wagon-box as he drove a team across a wide and undulating field where wheat had once grown. I waved to him, as a dutiful wife should, but he failed to see me. So I proceeded to cook my own breakfast, as best I could, and noticed for the first time how scant and chipped were the crockery dishes, how much in need of black-lead stood the stove, and how disorderly were the shelves above it. I noticed, in fact, a great many things that I'd overlooked in my fatigue of the night before. The living-room, in the broad light of day, was scarcely a thing of beauty. On two sacks of seed-grain, in one corner, lay a horse-collar and a coil of rope. Beside this stood a shovel and a broom worn down to a lop-sided stub. One corner of the stove, where a leg was missing, was supported by a grease-stained brick. The only wall decoration was a fly-specked calendar proclaiming the virtues of a cream-separator and two long wisps of golden-yellow wheat-straw, carefully crossed and wired on a highly varnished board. On an ugly big cupboard crowded with half-empty paper-bags and cartons stood a litter of tins and little glass jars filled with wheat-kernels, a few carpenter's tools, some tinned vegetables, some dried apricots, and a sadly worn copy of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Next to the cupboard was a meal-chest with a hinged top, carefully covered with zinc, presumably to keep rodents from gnawing

holes through the wood. On a set of home-made shelves against the opposite wall stood several rows of books, which I looked over with a more hopeful eye. But they all seemed to belong to the last century, from Huxley's *Lectures* and *Lay Sermons* to Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and Lyell's *Antiquity of Man*. What I needed most, I knew, was a cook-book. But I searched in vain for any such guide to the groping housewife. All I found was Spencer's *First Principles*, sadly worn, and a well-thumbed copy of Shakespeare and a coverless edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* neatly sewn together with black linen thread. The only thing of significance in those sad little rows of worn-out tomes, so gray with the dust of time, seemed to be two leather-bound volumes of Macaulay's *Essays*, inscribed as "A prize to James Bentley Gilson for excellence in English and public speaking, Sixth Grade, Aronsville High School." My lord-and-master, it is plain to see, is not altogether a dunderhead. But he had not dallied, it was equally easy to infer, along the airier paths of literature.

In the far corner of the room stood a battered old roll-top desk, which, I notice, my husband keeps under lock and key. He regards that desk, apparently, as his private and unapproachable property. Even to dust off its top, yesterday, gave me a distinctly Bluebeardy feeling. For Jamie keeps his papers there and at nights sits and figures and frowns over his accounts. They never seem to cheer him up much. But I respect his

feelings about that secret corner of his, just as he respects my old horsehide box. Never once has he looked into it. He shies off from it, in fact, as though it were a nude body, not for his eyes. And he seems willing to shy off from me in much the same way.

That ranch-house, on the whole, gave me a rather depressing sense of poverty. It seemed to signify life pared down to the bone. It showed me, too, how existence could be simplified, how people, if driven to it, could get along in the most restricted of homes. For it's the luxuries, obviously, that make life so terribly complicated—and I'll have very few of them to contend with.

Yet I felt, as I studied the happy-go-lucky disorder all about me, that running a house was not a man's job. One's husband, whose fight is outside the home, most assuredly should have a little peace and comfort when he steps inside that home. I even felt sorry for my Jamie, living as he had been forced to live. I knew, as I moved from silent room to room, a wifely impulse to make life richer and fuller for him. He needed a woman about. He had been cheated out of things, probably without even knowing it. It had left him a bit hardened and self-immured. And the first step in turning existence into something a trifle better than the animal-world would be a prompt and complete clean-up of that four-roomed shack that was to be our home.

So I rolled up my sleeves and began with the cup-

board, sorting and arranging and making a dooryard pile of the things for which I saw no use, from a dead mouse in a marmalade-tin to a pile of rusty nails in an old shoe-box. Then I attacked the book-shelves, telling myself, as I dusted and rearranged, that if you're clean you can't really be wrong. And when I had done my worst to the living-room I moved on to the kitchen, where the patina of bachelor neglect lay even thicker and the débris added to the dooryard pile was even more picturesque. Then, having swept down the walls and cleaned the windows, I possessed myself of yellow soap and hot water and scrubbed the floors. It was not easy work. It tired my arms and made my back ache. But I kept at it, buoyed up by the natural exultation of womanhood in seeing dirt finally meet its Waterloo. I was hard at work, trying to impart some sort of order to the dish-shelves, when I noticed my Jamie drive up to the stable, tie his team to one of the corral posts, and look rather hesitatingly toward the house.

I could see, as he started toward the shack, that he moved with the laggard step of uncertainty. By no stretch of the imagination could he be described as flying to his new wife on the wings of love. He even stopped beside my dump-pile and studied it rather ruefully. Then from it he salvaged the box of rusty nails, three empty tobacco tins, some odd bits of leather, and two empty grain-bags well perforated with rat-holes. These he carried meekly out to the cow-shed.

When he came into the house, five minutes later, I greeted him with a determinedly blithe "Good morning!" I don't know whether it was my form of greeting or the fact that he found his home so altered that held him speechless for a moment or two. He looked about with a slightly bewildered eye. Then a perceptible flush mantled his manly brow.

"It's an awful mess, isn't it?" he acknowledged. His flush, I realized, was not so much one of anger as one of shame.

I agreed that it would stand a bit of tidying up. And I expressed the hope that I hadn't thrown away anything of value.

"Oh, that's all right," he rather guiltily assured me. "We're apt to hoard things, out here. You have to, you see, when your nearest shop happens to be twenty miles away." He looked at me, for the first time, openly and frankly. "Did you sleep well?" he politely inquired.

"Very well, thank you," I said with equal politeness.

He stood there, very big and embarrassed, as I turned back to my dish-shelves, resenting the disheartening note of tension that had crept into our encounter.

"It may be a bit hard at first," he said with unexpected humility. "Everything's done so differently out here. Is there anything you especially need?"

"'Eaps of things," I retorted. I was both hurt and humiliated, I think, by that sustained note of detachment in my life-partner.

Jamie winced, but remained resolutely matter-of-fact.

"I'd suggest making a list," he solemnly informed me. "Just write down what's required and I'll bring it back from town when I'm hauling my grain."

"Some of the things I'll need most," I deliberately and rather tremulously proclaimed, "can't be bought in shops."

But it missed him by a mile. That barbed arrow merely bounced off his armor-plate of solemnity.

"What doesn't come from town, of course, we mostly raise," he patiently explained. "We've our own meat and milk and eggs. I've a pit of potatoes and turnips and a pretty good supply of cabbage and carrots. And four sacks of flour stowed away out in one of my stable-bins."

"That pretty well covers everything, doesn't it?" I listlessly concurred. For it had come home to me, as I stood there, that I was not being treated as most brides are treated on the second day of their honeymoon. It was more like a maid-of-all-work being fitted into a new place. Jamie didn't like me. To him, apparently, I'm just a rag and a bone and a hank of hair. And I'm not even a good cook. For when it came to getting dinner, which Jamie expected at mid-day, I hadn't boiled the potatoes long enough and the roast of pork was under-done and the tea I brewed tasted suspiciously like senna. But Jamie ate his way through that rather awful meal without open criticism.

He even offered to stay in and help me wash up. But I told him I'd do best alone.

He looked at me, rather startled, when I asked him if he would be in for afternoon tea. Then he gently but firmly said no. The only evening meal in the great open spaces, he explained to me, was supper, about six. And even in this I was guilty of another terrible mistake. For when Jamie confronted my supper-table, daintily laid out with jam and cake and tea, a slow and sorrowful smile spread over his gaunt face.

"It looks very nice," said Jamie, in slightly forced admiration of my neatly laid table, "but how about a little meat and fried potatoes?" And he explained, as he showed his good-for-nothing life-partner how to fry potatoes, that open-air work demanded a pretty substantial evening meal. It was my turn to wear a blush of embarrassment. My stupidity, in fact, rather spoiled the meal for me. And I had a second bad moment when, after supper, Jamie asked to look over my list of things most needed. He frowned as he ran an eye down the column, the column that had expanded like an opening telescope. His bewilderment, I thought, was based on the length of my list.

"Why, this is pretty good writing," he said, still blinking down at the sheet of paper in his hand. And I could feel myself turning pink as his perplexed brown eyes swung about and studied my face.

"I've 'ad a bit of schoolin'," I said with defensive meekness.

"So I assume," retorted Jamie, once more frowning over my smooth and flowing script. "Do you write better than you read?"

"Eaps," I promptly acknowledged. And I had the satisfaction of seeing him sigh over the dropped aspirate.

"Supposing we have a try at the reading to-night," he suggested with a somewhat hungry glance at his book-shelves.

"I was 'oping to unpack to-night," I parried.

That held him for a moment, frowningly thoughtful.

"Of course," he conceded as he reached for his pipe. And having filled and lighted it, he casually waved the same toward the door of the little bedroom. "And I suppose you may as well regard that room as your own."

It sounded trivial enough. But involved in it, I knew, was an indisputably momentous issue.

"Thank you kindly," I responded, trying to say it as quietly as possible.

Chapter Nine

JAMIE doesn't trust me. And where there is little trust there can be little understanding. So I remain a skirted enigma to him, to be studied with discretion and endured with patience. Sometimes, I feel, he is even secretly ashamed of me. For, on my third night here, a noisy group of neighboring ranchers came to shiver us. That, I imagine, is something between an Old World charivari and a surprise-party, for there were two or three dozen of them, men and women in cars and buckboards, with baskets of food and musical instruments, the younger folk on horseback. These younger folk, in fact, rode round and round the shack, giving Indian war-cries as they went, a couple of them even shooting off blank cartridges and making me feel like Lois Wilson in *The Covered Wagon*. But Jamie, unexpectedly grim and white, went out and headed them off. He told them, I understand, that I was ill and unable to entertain them that night. So they climbed back into their cars and buggies and went trekking off to the district school-house, where, I learned later, they held an impromptu dance.

Jamie explained, when he came in, still pale and grim-eyed, that we weren't ready for company yet and that there was too much rough-house about those rural shiverers. But my husband, I notice, has a tendency

to keep me out of things. When two strangers called at the shack yesterday, instead of decently asking them in to dinner, he led them outside and powwowed with them long and earnestly beside the cowshed. When they departed, oddly enough, they took with them Jamie's self-binder and tractor. I could see my husband watching the machines as they went lumbering away down the trail. But, when he returned to the house, he proffered me no explanation of that performance. Yet it plainly meant more to him than he pretended.

Wheat-ranching, I suspect, is not going so smoothly with my Jamie as it might. This may be the Land of Promise, but it doesn't seem to be bristling with optimism just now. My husband, whose chief crop, of course, is wheat, has threshed his grain and is now hauling the last of it in to the elevator at Elk Crossing. But at prevailing prices, he claims, he is losing money with every bushel he grows. And the buyers treat him unfairly, either forcing a lower grading on him or pretending, when that fails, that only the Number Two or the Number Three bins are, at the moment, waiting for grain, giving him the option of accepting the lower price or facing a two- or three-day wait with its resultant board and stable bills.

No wonder he seems discouraged. The every-day rancher's one hope, he has explained to me, is to go in more and more for mixed farming. But that, of course, means more work. And I'm beginning to

understand just how hard these western farmers toil. The truth of that came home to me when I meekly asked Jamie if he would carry me along with him, for a bit of shopping-in town, the next time he teamed a load of grain in to the elevators. He had his grain-tank, which holds one hundred and fifty bushels, all filled and waiting the night before. He was up before me, the next morning, having set his battered old alarm-clock for a quarter to four. When I emerged, twenty minutes later, he had the fire going, the kettle on and the bacon sliced. So I fell to, getting the rest of the breakfast ready by lamplight while Jamie went out to do his chores and feed and groom his horses by lantern-light. I had bacon and eggs and coffee and toast ready by the time he came in. And not one crumb was left on our plates.

Then came harnessing and hitching up, which is no easy task with four well-fed animals made frisky by the frosty morning air. But Jamie was a wonder at managing them, hitching the two heavier wheelers to the wagon-tongues and placing the livelier-stepping leaders in front of them. The leaders, however, refused to keep in line, the ramping wheelers betrayed an ambition to start off by themselves, and there was a fine lot of tug-chain rattling and rearing and whip-cracking before I could climb up on the seat beside Jamie. But the frosted tires were soon creaking and groaning over the frozen ground and a few sharp words and sharper cuts with the long whip settled the four

tugging animals into their stride. And seven long and chilly miles had been covered before the sun inched up over the rim of the prairie.

With the coming of daylight, in fact, I realized we weren't the only wheat-haulers in the world. Here and there, across that wide and rolling plain, I could see other wagons, heading, at the same heavy-laden pace, for the same elevators. They seemed, from the distance, to be moving only at a snail-like rate, creeping along the black thread of a trail that twisted its way down a distant slope, dipping in and out of ravines and hollows, across flats that lay a golden brown in the early morning sunlight. But onward they moved, from all points of the compass, two- and four- and six-horse teams, toiling slowly and steadily toward their far-off grain-tower. It was the bread of the world, going to market. It was the answer to Hunger, epic in its implications, with a quiet majesty all its own. We rumbled along trails rolled smooth with the wide tires of countless wagons, an occasional motor-car or road-trap turning out and bumping past us on the rough-rutted trail-side. But we marched solemnly on, with Jamie's four horses tugging at their traces and the sun mounting higher and higher. And as wagon by wagon converged toward the little town nestling along its twin streaks of steel the faster wagons, meeting up with the more slowly moving ones, were forced to retard their pace and fall into line, until we formed a long and silent procession, drawing closer

and closer to the high-domed elevator and the spitting little gasoline-motor that pumped its rivulets of golden grain up into the bins.

But if Jamie touched the skirts of Glory, in that wheat-hauling task, it failed to show itself in any exaltation of soul. Even that sprawling little prairie town, when I got to it, tended to key me up, after my days of ranch-life silence. But Jamie, after unloading his wheat, seemed especially self-immured and morose. He was, I knew, disappointed in the price. And money, apparently, means more to him than it ought. His preoccupation, at any rate, spoiled the long drive home. I might have forgotten the cold, and the long hours on the trail, and the smelly horse-blankets over my knees, if only he'd leaned over me with a loving word or two. Down under my floating ribs, all the way home, I had an achy little feeling of lonesomeness. I'd an absurd longing for Bath buns and damson jam and gooseberry tart and a moist, soft, English fog and the call of rooks from the pines behind the Hall and the sound of cuckoos and skylarks and the smell of English wallflowers and meadow violets. And some one to let me unbosom my soul to! But we don't seem to talk about our souls any longer. Nowadays, it's glands and complexes, and if you love somebody else beside your wife it's largely a matter of endocrines. But there's still a sort of Code we have to respect. You have to keep faith with your better nature, or pay the price. And I sacrificed some-

thing, I know, when I married in the way I did. I was flippant about fundamentals. I turned to wedlock, in my panic, as one turns to a fire-escape. It was cheating, in one way. And I have to pay for it. I wasn't even fair with Jamie. All I could place before him was the ashes of a burnt-out passion, my girlhood passion for Leslie. I hadn't much to give my husband. And even in coming to him as I did, I pretended to be something that I wasn't. And about all I can bring him now is service, the groping and often misdirected service of an incompetent tenderfoot.

But I'm learning a little. And, on the other hand, unlearning a great deal. I'm a good knitter, and with the yarn I bought in town I'm secretly knitting Christmas socks for my big-footed-lord-and-master. I'm sewing on buttons and patching for him. I've been going over his underwear and putting new seats in his panties—than which, when you come to think of it, nothing could be more intimate. And I'm slowly but surely learning to cook for him. For Jamie, I've found, is no idler. He gets up before six every morning and begins his chores by lantern-light. And now that I've grown into an understanding of what's expected of me, I have a hot breakfast waiting for him when he comes in. It's not exactly a continental breakfast. For my Jamie may be lean and hungry-looking, but he has an enormous appetite. He's not, obviously, pining away with any secret pangs of unrequited love. He ushers in a new day by making away with oatmeal



porridge and bacon and four eggs and toast and coffee. And I've learned to make his other meals equally substantial.

But it was Jamie himself who taught me how to mix and bake bread, how to dissolve the yeast-cake in a cup of lukewarm water and then stir it into a bowl with a cup of flour and a spoonful of sugar and a pinch of salt, and after this compound has been kept sheltered overnight, to warm a panful of flour in the oven and into it pour the foaming yeast, and knead and work the same, forgetting aching wrists, until it becomes a pliable big football of dough, which is set aside and kept warm, and later divided into six loaves and placed in its two big pans and set on the back of the stove to double in size and finally be committed to the oven. But, when the baking is finished, I find my reward for all that work. For out of the oven, if all has gone well and no chilling draft has blighted my dough as a chilling partner can blight a trusting heart, I take six loaves of sweet-smelling and brown-crustéd loveliness.

I've also learned to prime and switch off the wind-mill pump, and to keep a respectable fire going with this distinctly inferior Canadian coal, and to put the milk through a separator and feed the residuary whey to an army of squealing and crowding pigs. I've learned, as well, how to work and clean a barrel-churn, though one churning of cream flowed dolorously over the kitchen-floor because I'd forgotten to replace the

drain-plug. I no longer dread the cleaning and filling of what is locally known as a coal-oil lamp, and I'm losing my aversion to using Jamie's home-made soft-soap, for all its gooiness. And Jamie has shown me how to pluck and dress a fowl. It even impressed me as miraculous, the way, after he'd dipped his beheaded hen in hot water, those sinewy big hands of his removed the feathers from that plump and pallid carcase. And I've learned that turnips must boil hard for three-quarters of an hour, that cabbage must be crisped in cold water before it is quartered and cooked for forty minutes, and that it takes only a half-cupful of rice to make a potful of the finished product. But I still burn things. I tried, yesterday, to make English tea-biscuits, minus the raisins, but they were pretty well carbonized by the time I got them out of my overheated oven.

"This may not look like worship," I said as I placed those biscuits on the table, "but three times a day I shall place burnt offerings before you."

Jamie didn't see the joke. He merely nibbled at the edge of one of my incinerated tea-cakes and protested that they were uncommonly good. His digestion, I fancy, is much more active than his sense of humor. He's so pedagogic and paternal with me, sometimes, that I feel like shouting. But he's doing what he can, apparently, to give me a square deal. I've a fixed suspicion that he is pinched for money. Yet, at my request, he's been carrying back a ruinous num-

ber of household things from Elk Crossing. The most important was a cook-book, which I've been perusing with an intent and eager eye. To-morrow, I've decided, we shall have drop-cakes and Spanish cream. The other day when I asked Jamie why he had no wireless—or radio, as they call it in this country—he looked puzzled. But, instead of buying himself a new pair of rubber boots, he brought home the fixings for a one-tube set, which he is going to build himself. For my Jamie is a wonder at building and fixing things. He's soldered up that frost-split radiator of his and when it's restored to our motor-car I'm to go cruising with him, next Sunday, over the bounding prairie. But he still appears to be a trifle afraid of me. And his gaze, when I speak to him, still seems to come back from a great distance. Yet he never laughs at my mistakes, and the Lord knows I make enough of them. I've just learned that in America treacle is known as sirup, and paraffin is coal-oil and petrol is gas. Little things like that keep reminding me that these people are not my people. We don't speak quite the same language.

Yesterday I said to Jamie:

"After all that swatting, I can't get this old kettle clean."

He looked at me, perplexed. "What do you mean by swatting?" he asked.

"What would you mean?" I inquired.

Jamie said: "Well, we swat flies and we call Babe

Ruth"—whoever he may be!—"the King of Swat, and when we swat a thing we whack it."

So I had to explain that with us at Home swatting meant putting forth a prodigious effort. And there are so many otherwise trivial things like that to remind me I'm a stranger among strangers, a tender-foot in a strange land where life is pared down to the bone. For many other things keep reminding me what a thin red line stands between us and desolation. A few days ago I broke our lamp-chimney, the only one in the house. For two nights, because of that, we sat in semi-darkness, surrounded by the fitful rays of a tallow candle. Hereafter, I'm going to see to it that we have not only an extra chimney or two, but also an extra lamp.

Jamie told me, this morning, that I was losing a little of my color. He said, solemn-eyed, that I was undoubtedly "swatting" too hard. When I ventured to inquire if he wasn't suffering from the same complaint, he wagged his head up and down and averred that we were, after all, only going to live once. So he took the morning off and showed me about the ranch. He introduced me to all the outbuildings and implements and stock, from the musky-smelling milch-cows to his hay-munching horses, to say nothing of a couple of hundred noisy chickens and ducks and more pigs and calves and cattle than I'd ever dreamed were there. Just at present he's feeding good wheat to his swine, which struck me as the height of extravagance. But

with wheat at fifty-odd cents a bushel, my husband contends, it may be as well turned into pork. And he showed me the fat old sow that is soon going to pay for our winter groceries. He also showed me where and how to gather the fowl-eggs, which in winter-time freeze if they are left in the nests.

I got an unexpected thrill out of garnering a milk-pan full of new-laid eggs. I also gave an unexpected one to Jamie, I think, for I slipped on his crazy old ladder, coming down from a half-used-up haystack, and fell right in his arms. He hung on to me, I thought, for just a moment or two longer than was actually necessary. But reason came back to him, before the day was entirely lost, and I was planted safely and disappointingly on my feet again. It struck me as odd, though, that one's husband should blush with embarrassment when one leans for a moment against his manly breast. Some day, I've decided, I'm going to give Jamie a run for his money. But we'll have to get better acquainted, I see, before we can get better acquainted. Which is less of a paradox than it sounds.

In the meantime I'm doing what I can to convert this bald little shack into something more like a home. I've put chintz curtains up on the windows and we shall no longer eat at a table covered with knife-scarred oilcloth. I'm making cushions out of flowered cretonne, which Jamie has promised to stuff with fowl-feathers for me. I've a brand-new broom and scrub-brush, and a few dish-towels that aren't made out of

old wheat-bags, and a tea-kettle that doesn't leak, and a new galvanized tub which is big enough, I yesterday discovered by actual experiment, for a perfect lady to take a bath in.

There—I knew I would do it before I'd gone far! I'm maundering, *more Anglico*, about me bawth. I can't and don't understand why we English are always talking about our bathing. We're still bath-conscious, apparently. We still seem to think that scrubbing should be celebrated in song and story, that one's social status is determined by one's ablutionary tendencies. It's based, I suppose, on the time and effort that once went to such rites, at Home. At any rate, I now nurse a distinctly self-righteous feeling after being tubbed and rubbed beside my kitchen stove. I have a foolish and flighty feeling that I'd like to have some one nuzzle down into the hollow of my neck and then softly but firmly aver that I smelled like a nice clean girl. Especially after using that highly scented toilet soap from Elk Crossing. But Jamie, this evening, is about as sociable as a polar bear and as approachable as the monkey-puzzle tree that grew behind the grape-arbor at Home. For when he came in, just before supper, he brought with him the mail from our rural-delivery box at the crossroads. And among other things was a fat and friendly letter from Hugh. My husband, as I went hungrily through the letter, evinced no outward interest in my movements. But the incident, for some reason, left him more than ever silent

and self-immured. . . . I'd like to get hold of the romance-weaving idiot who first penned that time-worn proclamation: "And they married and lived happily ever afterward." For he was, I now know, the king of liars.

Chapter Ten

MY SCHOOLING, I find, continues. Every day, in every way, I grow wiser and wiser. For Jamie is still intent on educating his more or less illiterate life-partner. Last night, after I'd stumbled through a page and a half of *Sartor Resartus*, he quietly but firmly took the book away from me and read two whole chapters aloud. Then, after asking me to be good enough to abstain from sewing, he proceeded to explain the intricacies of a long out-moded Carlylean philosophy. But I couldn't help wondering what Jamie would have thought if he'd known I'd once shaken hands with George Moore and pioneered through every page of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

And I've been finding out things about James Bentley Gilson. My Jamie isn't Canadian born, as I thought, but came from across the Line. He was born and brought up in Iowa, and, like so many of his fellow-countrymen, trekked north for cheaper land. He talks rather longingly, now and then, of the States, has no particular love for Englishmen, and explained the Fourth of July to me as the day when his forefathers licked my forefathers. When, in a not unnatural spirit of reciprocity, I asked him why so many North Americans conversed through their noses, he promptly inquired why so many of my silly-ass

countrymen still cockneyized their King's English and corrupted the speech of Shakespeare. He plainly insists on being loyal to his own hemisphere. He even advanced the claim that we English slur more of our speech than we imagine, that we pinch the tail off such words as "necessary" and "library" and "literary," that we murder our proper names, and that we convert enunciation into a snobbish indication of caste. Only, when we English ill-use the language, we're of course always right.

For Jamie, mark you, hasn't always been a farmer. For three years he was a school-teacher, solemnly educating little Scandinavians and Ruthenians in a tiny two-by-four wooden schoolhouse in northern Alberta. And now he wants to educate me. He thinks that if we read together every night it will improve my mind. He admits I'm naturally bright and has made me promise to be more careful about not dropping my aitches. And I have meekly promised to improve.

But I keep making mistakes. I made one yesterday, apparently, when my hatred for our bald and ugly glass lamp finally drove me into an effort to beautify it. I concocted a rather wabby frame out of stove-wire and then took a rose-colored silk scarf that didn't seem of much use to me and fashioned it into a fluted lamp-shade. It wasn't easy to do, but it gave a softer and warmer light to the whole room. Yet when Jamie came in for supper he stood regarding that rose-colored shade with a mildly hostile eye. When I asked him

if he didn't like it he asked me in turn if I didn't think it gave the room rather a Turkish atmosphere. And when our book-reading hour approached he quietly reached over and removed my shade from the lamp. He must have noticed the hurt expression on my face, for he patiently pointed out that it seemed manifestly foolish to burn up coal-oil to create a given amount of light and then smother three-quarters of it under a lot of cloth. Poor Jamie will learn, some day, that the softness of illusion is often worth more than the open glare of actuality.

My second mistake was an even more disturbing one. It occurred to-day, after one of those exceptional midday meals when I wasn't positively ashamed of my cooking. Jamie, having dined well, sat in such a delusively mellow mood that I was tempted to bring out a cigarette and light it. He was busy lighting his own pipe and didn't realize, at first, what his bandoned wife was doing. His jaw dropped, when he saw that I was smoking, and his face actually lost a little of its color. He grew quite granitic, in fact, and asked me where I had learned such habits. It's his belief, apparently, that only bad women do things like that. I couldn't even argue about it or remind him that Queen Mary herself was guilty of an occasional coffin-nail. But out here where life is so broad and bounteous, it seems, the woman who smokes is apt to be written down as a suspicious character. And I've nipped the flower of Jamie's slow-budding faith in his consort.

He has even been asking me rather pointed questions about my origin and ancestry. I was tempted, for one perilous moment, to explain that I happened to be the impoverished but respectable grand-niece of the eighteenth Earl of Arrusdale, equally impoverished, and the daughter of a Church of England vicar who, impecunious as he may have been, had the habit of reading Hesiod's *Theogony* before breakfast. But I merely professed that I came of poor but honest parents, had been brought up a Christian, and would eschew the opprobrious fag if my husband so desired. Jamie said, rather coldly, that he'd prefer I didn't smoke. But he's worrying about me. And he makes me feel not only more and more like an impostor, but also more and more like a failure.

That's the trouble, apparently, with these pig-in-a-poke marriages. I've been trying to console myself with the claim that big landscapes don't alway imply big lives, that the narrowest of minds can be planted on the broadest of prairies. Yet Jamie, in one way, is right. Both men and women, when it comes to wedlock, have a natural inclination to know something about the party of the second part. That solemn fact came home to me when, this morning, I was sweeping out the bedroom and from its resting place in a floor-crack disinterred a hairpin. It was a tiny and trivial thing of black wire and yet I stood over it as startled as Robinson Crusoe must have been when he stumbled on those first footprints of Friday in the sand. For I

had been given to understand that no petticoated Fridays had ever invaded this little island of bachelordom. But a hairpin implied a woman. And the more I thought of that unknown woman the more ridiculously disturbed in spirit I became.

But I was feminine enough, when Jamie came in to dinner, not to confront him with that telltale loop of wire and demand an explanation. I greeted him smilingly, served him promptly, and permitted no untoward event to mar the even tenor of that meal. Then, when he sat back in post-prandial contentment, I asked him a casual question or two about his earlier "batching" experiences.

Jamie acknowledged that he hadn't always lived alone. During his first summer on the ranch, he told me, he had taken in a bibulous old wanderer by the name of Pop Scovil, who stayed with him for seven months. Pop, when he abstained from fire-water, was a pretty good cook and as handy as a woman about the house. He played the accordion and read penny dreadfuls and subscribed to *The Matrimonial Guide*, a publication whereby would-be grooms, through His Majesty's mails, were brought into long-distance contact with duly advertised bride-elects. But Pop, who was fat and soft-muscled, was averse to handling a team or working on the land. And Pop, when liquor was finally denied him, moved on to other fields. He was replaced, in time, by one Scotty McQuail, whom Jamie described as a dour and raw-boned misanthrope

with an inordinate love for dogs. Scotty, in fact, just about turned the ranch-house into a kennel. The deep-scratched grooves on the house-doors had been put there by Scotty's hounds. And the mysteriously cleansed baseboard which I'd observed about the kitchen walls was merely the high-water mark where Scotty's litter of collie-pups had licked away every adhering vestige of grease. Scotty was a silent and steady worker but not much of a companion. And the old wanderlust overtook him, with the coming of spring, and he departed, followed across the prairie, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, by a troop of yelping canines.

"Are those the only helpers you've ever had here?" I casually inquired.

And my Jamie, I noticed, hesitated for a moment or two.

"No," he finally admitted, "I had an Indian woman, a woman called Nellie, to keep house for me a while last spring."

"What was she like?" I asked, remembering that "Nellie" was rather an absurd name for a redskin lady, and wondering, at the same time, if the lady wore a war-bonnet of eagle feathers and just why I should be so preposterously jealous of that unknown predecessor.

"Nellie weighed nearly two hundred pounds," retorted Jamie. "And it took me three weeks to get rid of the bedbugs she brought along with her."

I felt better after that, but I wasn't entirely easy in my mind.

"Where did she sleep?" I inquired, still thinking of that inflammatory hairpin.

He didn't seem to remember, at first. But he eventually recalled that the corpulent Nellie had reposed on a shake-down in one corner of the kitchen. And Jamie went on to explain that he had tried to teach her to read and write but she displayed a disappointingly small interest in the three *R*'s.

"I hope you'll be more successful with her successor," I observed, without giving much thought to what I was saying. And I was sorry, the moment I'd spoken. For I could see the slow flush of anger that dyed my husband's lean face. He started to say something, but apparently changed his mind. Instead of telling me that I wasn't much better, all things considered, than the little sisters of Sitting Bull, he got up from his chair and flung out of the house. And people, as vitreously domiciled as myself, I remembered, should never throw stones. Only I wondered, as I went rather heavy-hearted about my afternoon's work, what my prairie neighbors were thinking about me and if they knew that Big Jim had picked me from the bough of mischance as haphazardly as Pop Scovil picked his marriageable ladies from *The Matrimonial Guide* lists. I could feel, deep down in my heart, a small and nagging mouse-gnaw of homesickness. I was lonely, not so much for the land of my sires, as for that human

and companionable understanding which should exist between every man and wife.

But that whimpering pup of discontent was soon drowned in the waves of work. And I stumbled on things enough to keep me busy. For in this country, I find, you have to do for yourself. You have to be your own cook and charwoman and laundress and lamp-filler and bread-maker and baker and butcher. This afternoon, in fact, I thought that my rudeness to Jamie had, for a moment, driven him mad. For I observed him, through the open shack-door, drag a capering and long-legged calf into one corner of the corral, where he abruptly felled it with an ax-blow and proceeded to cut its throat. Having done that, he strung it up on a near-by frame and attacked it with a butcher-knife. I'd often heard of things being hanged and drawn and quartered, but I'd never before been a personal witness of any such proceedings. It rather sickened me. Yet it merely reminded me, in the end, that I'd moved a step or two closer to the ways of nature. And nature is cruel. We still have to kill to eat. And Jamie was merely providing his home-circle with a supply of fresh veal. Yet I'd rather not know where my meat was coming from, until I can see it nicely cut up into roasts.

But Jamie, besides proving that he's a good butcher, keeps surprising me with his cleverness at doing things. He's the handiest man I ever saw. Besides partly rebuilding this shack, he did most of the cement and car-

penter work on the new cow-shed. He can shingle a roof or dig a well or tan a wolf-skin. He can handle an ax and harness horses and shoot enough wild duck for Sunday dinner and milk cows and darn his own socks and bake a batch of bread. But the latter two accomplishments he'll never practise again when I'm in this neighborhood. He has just made me a double-walled warming-box to shelter our bread-dough when it is rising, a sort of Dutch-oven affair to keep the chilling drafts away from my sponge. He has also promised to help me paper the living-room. And among his other accomplishments, I notice, he can also claim to be a cobbler. He has a last and shoe-nails, and pegs new soles to his worn-out boots. And speaking of boots, he's taught me how to dry them out overnight, when they are water-soaked. You simply slip a pan of oats into the oven, fill the sodden footwear with the hot grain, and leave them till morning. That draws away the moisture, as completely as an unlucky marriage can dry up the springs of happiness.

For Jamie, I know, isn't happy. He feels, I'm sure, that he's been cheated. He's disappointed in me, in some way. But he's too chivalrous to say so. I wish, sometimes, that his bump of humor was a little bigger. Then we might sit down, man to man, and talk things over. But he has reservations which, apparently, I am expected to respect. He doesn't exactly avoid me. He's patient and forbearing and almost fatherly, in certain things. But there's a barrier between us. He's

obviously not in love with his grab-bag wife. If he really cared, he'd soon enough crash through all those flimsy little paper fences of shyness. It's a sort of hold-out, I fancy, on both sides. For, no matter what my feelings are, he can't expect a perfectly strange lady to fling herself pantingly into his arms. A man hates a woman who tries to elbow him out of his time-honored rôle of leadership in such things. The male is still the hunter. He likes to pursue while we withdraw.

But every woman, I suppose, occasionally sends up a little trial balloon or two. To-night, after supper, I said that I'd have to get some cold cream for my hands. Being in water so much is making them look more and more like Matilda Ann's. Jamie stared down at them as though he had seen them for the first time in his life. They seemed to bewilder him.

"They don't look as if they'd done much work," he finally observed.

"But they're rather nice hands to hold," I shamelessly amended. And for a hesitating moment or two I actually thought that Jamie was going to find out if I was telling the truth. But he remembered himself, just in the nick of time. He stiffened up, reached for his pipe and surrounded himself with a cuttle-fish cloud of tobacco-smoke.

I tried not to show my disappointment. But I wondered, as I sat meekly knitting a pair of gray wool socks for my Better-Half, if the Lord had made me

without It, the It that the cinema half-wits prate about. I've also been wondering if I'm lithe. I don't exactly know what being lithe means, but the lady man-eaters in popular fiction, I've observed, always seem to be lithe.

There's one thing, however, that I do know. I know that I'm lonely. I'm suffering from the queerest sort of lonesomeness that ever took possession of a sane and able-bodied bride. And, unwilling as I may be to admit it, I'm nursing a growing but dismal sense of defeat. I'm living under the same roof with a man who has never once addressed me by my first name, who has never even made an effort to find out if I've anything more than a robot's clockworks under my gingham-covered bosom. And I'm beginning to wonder how long this sort of thing can go on.

Chapter Eleven

THIS is not perfectly flat prairie country, but rolling and rather like an ocean turned solid, an ocean with long ground swells of tawny brown, the color of a lion's back. And far-off things, in this crystalline air, can look deceptively close. We're just at the beginning of the foot-hills and along the western sky-line, on clear days, we can see the blue-white peaks of the Rockies, glistening and remote and majestic enough to remind us that life is bigger than the puny little problems we carry around with us in our puny little star-crossed bodies.

After staring at those Rockies, a few days ago, I ventured to ask Jamie if it wasn't a calamity when people entirely lost the spirit of play. And that seemed to give my solemn-eyed husband something to think about.

"Yes, why should we slave our lives away?" he said out of a prolonging silence. "It's not going to get us anywhere."

So we shut up shop and went forth for a day in the open. We took grub and guns and tramped out to some half-frozen sloughs back of the Slater ranch. Jamie brought down seven mallard ducks and on the way home again bagged three plump-bodied prairie-chicken. I peppered away at things, but had no luck,

probably because, as Jamie solemnly pointed out, I shut my eyes every time a trigger was pulled. It was good fun, however, and I felt less kitchen-minded after that day in the open. I also learned that our ranch is a bit bigger than I imagined. My preconceived idea of Canadian farming was largely based on what I knew of English husbandry, a sedate and leisured tilling of garden-like fields, with a judicious breeding and feeding of farm-animals, a casual toying with fruit-trees, and a genteel superintending, from the saddle, of gaitered groups of under-workers. But out here, where the fields are vast and men are scarce, it's a more adventurous battle against unpredictable seasons, where the threat of drought or frost or rust provides hazard enough for the enterprise. It's more of a gamble, a one-man fight against nature. For this is a wheat country. When prices are high fortunes are made from a single crop. When prices are low, as they are at present, men have to look ruin in the face. My Jamie, in fact, seems to have lost his earlier enthusiasm for wheat-growing. Like his neighbors, he can't see much hope for the future. And it will be a struggle, apparently, to hold his land. But he keeps on, in an embittered sort of stubbornness, doing what he can to meet his notes and remember his mortgage interest. But even Jamie's best doesn't seem to be quite enough, for yesterday he rather bitterly proclaimed that he at least had the consolation of knowing I couldn't have married him for his money. Yet he tells me that going bust, out

here, doesn't seem to worry people much. It's the land of promise; they take their gambler's chance, and if they lose they simply move on and start over again. They live, not for yesterday, but for to-morrow. For there is, after all, something uplifting and tonic about this climate. This clear prairie air of ours can be about as exhilarating as sparkling Burgundy. It turns one into an optimist. There are times, however, when one can leave too much to atmospheric conditions. Yet, true to my mud-lark tradition, I insist on being happy. I want my place in the sun. I may not have much to leave me light-hearted, but I intend to make the most of it.

Jamie has fixed up an old Mexican saddle for me and is solemnly intent on teaching me to ride. The high-horned saddle he's given me makes me think of an arm-chair and I feel more than ever an impostor in pretending that I'm all but helpless on horseback. Not that I ever rode so well. But I've a rôle to sustain. It's not easy, however, for I forget myself in the joy of galloping over this rolling prairie-country at Jamie's side. And I'm slender enough, thank heaven, not to look like a scarecrow in knickers. These prairie ponies, or broncos, as they're called, lope along so easily. And I'm getting tougher, in the places where toughness seems to be needed. Jamie himself rides well but he doesn't appear at his best on horseback. He's too long-legged to look dignified in the saddle. He seems oversized, on that obviously undersized bronco of his,

and makes me think of a Don Quixote on an under-slung and overloaded Rosinante.

My riding has also brought me face to face with my first adventure. I hadn't entirely realized how much alone Jamie and I lived until, along what we call the Bolton Trail yesterday, I ran into a perfect stranger. He was polite enough, as our horses stood nose to nose, and explained that he was Marty Strickland, a neighbor of mine, and hoped that I was getting along nicely since I had become an igloo dweller.

I knew, as soon as I heard that clipped and carelessly cadenced voice of his, that he was an Englishman. And, if it seemed strange to hear myself openly addressed as "Mrs. Gilson" for the first time, it was also good to talk to one's own kind again. He was quiet-mannered and blond and blue-eyed, but not so young as he looked with his hat on, for, when he removed his sombrero, I could see where his ash-colored hair was over-punctually thin on top.

So, when he rode casually home with me, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to ask him in for a cup of tea. It was my first social encounter since my marriage and I tried not to be too excited about it all. But we got along rather well, notwithstanding our crockery cups and none too fresh tea-biscuits, though my caller, I noticed, kept inspecting me with shrewdly guarded eyes. I watched him, equally alert, for I had a sort of craving to test my long repudiated womanhood against the counter of male impressionability. And

there we were, two lonely expatriates sipping tea and talking rather hungrily of Home, when Jamie walked in on us. Now Jamie has an eye that's usually about as meditative and kindly as Einstein's, but I could see it harden as it fell on Marty Strickland sitting there toggled out in his cinema-like cowboy costume. Jamie didn't openly insult the man, but I could feel some cold breath of animosity creep into the room. My new friend and neighbor, it's true, put forth a valorous enough effort to keep up his stream of small talk and remained unconcernedly cordial as he made his *adieux*. But Jamie practically froze him out.

"You don't like this man Strickland?" I said as soon as we were alone again.

"Do you?" asked Jamie in his slow and solemn way.

"His manners were at least adequate to the occasion," I thoughtlessly retorted.

Jamie didn't wince, as I had hoped. He merely stood bathing me in that ruminatively perplexed stare of his.

"Yes, he has very impressive manners," Jamie finally admitted. "But I happen to know him considerably better than you do."

"Does that mean I'm forbidden to speak to him?" I asked with a quiet bitterness that brought Jamie's contemplative eyes back to my face.

Jamie didn't flinch before my embattled stare. Indeed, an unlooked-for humility crept slowly into his face.

"I haven't the right to tell you what to do, or not to

do," he informed me. "But there seems to be enough trouble hanging over this home circle without going out and looking for more."

"Aren't you my husband?" I demanded, a little hurt by his aloofness.

He looked up at me, with his deep and cavernous eyes, and my absurd little wave of anger merged into an equally absurd wave of pity for him.

"Am I?" he asked, with a suspicion of a quaver in his voice.

I should have had the courage, at that moment, to go to him and tell him that I was willing to be his, body and soul. But something held me back. I suppose it was pride, the blind and foolish pride of wounded womanhood.

"That, apparently, is something still awaiting your personal decision," I said, trying to keep the quaver out of my own voice.

I could see his frown of perplexity deepen, as I spoke. He even stared at me for a moment of studious silence.

"You seem to be forgetting your rôle," he slowly and grimly announced.

"In what way?" I asked, disturbed by the hardening lines of his lean and bony face.

"You don't seem quite so illiterate," he proclaimed, "as you preferred to have me believe."

I knew then what he meant. And I could feel the color flood up into my face.

"Perhaps I have virtues you haven't yet discovered," I said with purely defensive bitterness as his solemn eyes continued to study my hot and unhappy face. Then, heaving a great breath, he turned away, his bony hands hanging limply at his sides.

"I don't suppose," he said as he slumped dispiritedly into a chair, "that I've much right to harp on that sort of thing. For I've something to put straight with you. And it may as well come now."

I thought, as I stared at his morose and tragic face, that he was going to tell me how he had lived in sin with Indian Nellie and that my copper-skinned predecessor had first claim on his name and companionship. And I wondered how much I would be able to forgive and forget. But my imagination, I soon discovered, was barking up the wrong tree.

"You may as well know," my absurdly solemn-eyed Jamie was saying to me, "that I brought you here under false pretenses. I'm an impostor."

"That," I told him, is something I shall never believe."

"You'll have to," he retorted. "For I've been about as small and mean-spirited in all this as a man could possibly be. I pretended to be something that I'm not. I promised you protection and a home. And those are exactly the things that I'm not able to give you."

"Why not?" I asked, feeling the color ebb from my face again.

"Because I'm a bankrupt," said the huge-bodied stranger in the wooden chair that creaked as he turned and stared out the window. "I'm a failure, and I've been ashamed to admit it. I can't stay under this roof. I can't stay on this ranch. It's mortgaged up to the hilt and I can't raise the money to keep them from foreclosing. I've tried to tide things over. God knows, I've tried. But I know now it's no use. I'm bust."

"Oh, Jamie!" I cried, shaken with pity as I saw the stricken light in his eye. "Oh, Jamie!" I repeated, doing my best to keep it from sounding like a sob. For Jamie, I knew, was the sort of man who'd always count on success. And, as I saw him avoid my gaze while moving his head assentingly up and down, I had an odd impression of history repeating itself. For it hadn't been so long ago, in another home some seven thousand miles away, that I'd been confronted with a similar message of calamity.

"We've got to get out," he went grimly on. "And they'll take about all I've got. I'm a man, and it's easy enough for me. I can always get work of some sort. But you're a woman. And that makes it different. That makes it so colossally unfair."

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked, speaking as quietly as possible.

That brought his reluctant gaze up to my face. But, for reasons of his own, he soon preferred to look out of the window again.

"I suppose," he said, still grim and solemn, "you'd

prefer going back to your own people. You haven't been very happy here. And that's easy enough to understand. I even hate myself when I stop to think how I brought you out here under false pretenses. But I'll get enough money, in some way, to see that you're taken safely back."

"I haven't helped much, have I?" was the best I could say, determined as I was not to let him see the tears that smarted in my eyes.

"It was hopeless, from the first," he reminded me. "It started wrong. And I can't see much use in prolonging the agony."

"Has it been agony?" I asked, more hurt than I was willing to acknowledge.

"It must have been," retorted Jamie, "for you."

There was a mute sort of contriteness in his melancholy brown eyes as they met mine. And, oddly enough, I had never felt closer to him in spirit than I did at that moment when we were so solemnly talking about separating.

I sat down, face to face with him, compelling myself to calmness.

"Isn't it about time," I quietly inquired, "that we got down to brass tacks, that we should be open and honest with each other?"

"In what way?" he asked with an answering quietness.

"In facing the future," I told him.

"We don't seem to have any," retorted Jamie. And

the hopeless misery of his face, the visible despair of a strong man finally beaten, made it hard for me not to reach out a comforting hand to him.

"But while there's life there's hope," I inanely proclaimed as Jamie looked at me with a remote and commiserative eye.

"There's not much hope for failures," he asserted, "in a country like this. You've got to make good or get out."

"How soon do we have to go?" I asked.

"Oh, we could hang on for a while," acknowledged Jamie, "but it would only be side-stepping our final problem. And it could never seem like home."

"Could we stay here until spring?" was my next question.

"What's the use?" parried Jamie. "All we'd have would be a winter of misery, with our problem still in front of us."

"We'd be together," I found the courage to suggest. But my unhappy consort, plainly enough, could harvest scant consolation from that thought.

"You don't know these northwest winters," he reminded me. "They're bad enough, even when you've got everything that money can buy. And they're hell when you haven't even the common comforts of life."

"But we have each other," I abandonedly proclaimed. And I watched my husband's big hands, watched them about the same as a quivering terrier watches a rat-hole. I waited to see if those reckless

words of mine would impart any life to his limply hanging arms, would bring them out toward me in an answering wave of recklessness. But Jamie's mind, apparently, was on other things. He was in no mood to be emotional. When a man is shipwrecked and on the rocks, naturally, he isn't apt to breathe sweet nothings into a shell-pink ear. So all I could do was to tighten my belt, regain my composure and remember what a certain old salt once said about never giving up the ship.

"Then what are we going to do?" I asked in my most matter-of-fact manner. "Have you anything in mind, I mean? And, if so, where do we go from here?"

The briskness of my query seemed to bewilder him.

"I was thinking of going to the Coast," he said with a listless sort of heaviness. "I could get work there with one of the lumber gangs. Or I might fit in, I suppose, on one of the dairy-farms."

The one thing that impressed me, as I looked at him, was his desolation of soul. He seemed so terribly alone, so inarticulately befogged and friendless, that my heart ached for him. But I couldn't afford to show it.

"You know, of course, that I can't go back to England," I reminded him.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because there's nothing to go back to," I explained, not without my own feeling of shipwreck. "I'm afraid we'll have to stick together in some way."

His gloomily meditative eyes turned back to me, studying my face.

"It doesn't seem fair," he finally asserted.

"We English are a bulldog race," I quietly retorted.

"But I've nothing to offer you," he said in his blindness.

"Are you sure?" I asked. For just a moment, as he stared at me, I could see the barriers go down. Into those cavernous sad eyes of his crept a look of hunger, of recklessness, of something more than recklessness. Then he remembered himself. He turned away, with a slow flush staining his face, as disturbed, apparently, as though a strange woman had looked on him in his nakedness.

"We don't seem to know each other very well, do we?" I meekly suggested.

"That's the unfair part of it," conceded Jamie, once more sure of himself. "We're man and wife, and yet, in a way, we're utter strangers to each other. It leaves me rather afraid of you. It's got me all mixed up."

"Then let's get acquainted," I said with what blitheness I could command.

"That isn't as easy as it sounds," answered Jamie.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because we started wrong," was the solemn-noted reply. "It's—it's like going into a race blindfolded."

He was, I knew, still again thinking about that pig-in-a-poke marriage of ours. And such things, I realized, should be done in the way sanctioned by tradi-

tion. When you lose dignity at such times, apparently, you lose security, the solid foundation of self-esteem, and the esteem of those about you. No wonder poor Jamie had his doubts about the penny he had picked up in the road-dust.

"You must," he half enviously suggested, "have had some mighty good times in your life."

"I have," I finally acknowledged. "Haven't you?"

He sat silent a moment, staring down at his big sinewy hands, the hands that in some way always sent a small wave of pity through me. He made me think of a mountain pine, twisted and gnarled and wind-tortured, strong but a trifle too hard-sinewed.

"Oh, I've kept going," he rather listlessly responded. "But I can't expect the things that satisfied me to satisfy a woman."

If ever a man needed happiness in his life, I felt, it was James Bentley Gilson. But to talk of love, at such a time, would be too much like bringing eau-de-Cologne to a gladiator.

"There are two things," I ventured, "that I'm wishing for right now."

"What are they?" he asked.

"One is," I told him, "that you weren't so abysmally honest. And the other is that you weren't suffering from an atrophied sense of humor."

"Why do you say that?" he demanded.

"Because I've never heard you laugh, really laugh, since I came under this roof."

"There are certain things you don't do at a funeral," he was heartless enough to retort. Yet he must have noticed my quick change of color, for his gesture, when he looked up, was a self-derogatory one. "Oh, I don't mean *you*," he cried. "I mean my own failure as a wheat-grower."

"But wheat-growing," I contended, "isn't everything in life."

"It has been in mine," replied Jamie.

I felt a vague jealousy of this wheat that could so engross his time and thought, that could stand between him and the softer issues of life. It left no room for anything as trivial as a woman's happiness. It brought home to me how, after all, my eggs had been placed in the wrong basket.

But I refused to strike my colors. I might be a failure as a wife but I could still mean something as a work-partner. And if I had been as romantic about husbands as I had once been about Indians, it was time to come down to earth again.

"Speaking of wheat," I said in the most matter-of-fact voice that I could command, "would you mind moving those bags so I can clean up the Barracks?"

My husband-in-name-only laughed a trifle dourly.

"Do you know what's in 'em?" he inquired.

"Seed-wheat, isn't it?" I ventured.

"The best seed-wheat that ever got in a gunnysack," he said with an embittered sort of vehemence that

puzzled me for a moment or two. But I thought little more about it, though Jamie went dutifully out and began moving his grain-bags to the remoter corner of the room, and, having done so, once more covered them with their patched old tarpaulin.

Chapter Twelve

THE debacle has been postponed. We're not to be put off our ranch until the end of winter. And the Great Experiment continues.

But Jamie still perplexes me. He seems to have surrendered to a mood of irresponsibility, a sort of *carpe-diem* carelessness, that doesn't harmonize with his customary solemnity. It may be like whistling past the graveyard or dancing on a volcano or singing in the tumbrel on the way to the guillotine, but it's at least a welcome change. And Jamie is at last learning how to laugh. He laughed when I called his shotgun a fowling-piece, and he laughed when I bestowed on his old car, which dances so engagingly over our rough prairie-roads, the name of "Pavlova." Yet when I pointed out to him that we were much too anonymous and proposed that we christen our home "Journey's End," since I had once traveled so far to find it, the smile died on his lips and a defensive sort of far-away look came into his eye. And if, in an unguarded moment, he openly addressed me as Lady Sparrow, there was acid enough in that appellation to keep me from rejoicing over a new intimacy. For even though Jamie may sometimes make me think of Antony at Actium, I'm not the Cleopatra who's beguiling him to give up all that's best in life.

But, since the battle's lost, we may as well grin and bear it. Since the ship must go down, we may as well enjoy what sun there is on deck. So, having achieved this peace of abnegation, we proceeded to make this ramshackle old ranch-house a little more comfortable for hibernating in. We've even sallied forth and seen a little more of our neighbors. We went so far as to go to a dance, in fact, at the district school-house, where corn-meal was spread on the floor and ranchers rode in for forty miles for a few hours of fox-trotting and sleeping babies were parked along a side-wall while their florid parents participated in old-fashioned square-dances and finished up with coffee and doughnuts at the approach of morning.

But it was noisy and rough and I was none too happy in that circle of outlanders with whom I had little in common. And Jamie openly resented my dancing with Marty Strickland, who didn't lose much time in beating about the bush, but coolly informed me that I didn't look happy and that I never would be happy so long as I lived with Big Jim. What tempting alternative he had to offer I never did learn, for I became expediently tired and ended the dance right there. Yet Jamie, when I joined him, was like a thunder-cloud. He didn't openly reprove me. But his eyes said, as plain as print, that he didn't want me dancing with Strickland.

"Then why don't *you* dance with me?" I asked, speaking aloud.

It seemed to startle him, that I had read his thoughts so closely. But he smiled a bit wistfully and said that he wasn't much of a dancer. I suggested, however, that we try it. And we did. Jamie took me in his bear-like arms and we got along as well, I fancy, as the rest of that free-and-easy group. But it seemed to worry him, having me that close to him. And something told me that he wasn't so happy as he might have been. And on the long drive home, over the prairie covered with a new-fallen blanket of snow, he was so oddly silent and withdrawn that I pretended to fall asleep. But I was much wider awake than he imagined. For I wanted some one to make a fuss over me. I felt dangerously alone in the world. And it was such a wonderful night, for all the cold, with a star-studded dome of the deepest violet-blue arching over us and a lovely showing of Northern Lights along the sky-line and not a sound but the muffled patter of our horses' feet and the singing of our iron wheel-tires as they crunched over the snow, as crisp as charcoal. It seemed a sin, that such a gorgeous night should be wasted on two self-frustrating human beings who were foolish enough to let happiness slip through their fingers. And it seemed odd, when we got home, that we should both tumble morosely into our own beds. The only thing that kept my spirits up was the sunrise, an incredible riot of opal and orange and rose and gold in the eastern sky. I threw a kiss to it, before dropping off to three hours of much-needed sleep. For when

you're dead to beauty you're really no longer alive. It's time, when you can't get a thrill of rapture out of something or other, to be measured by the undertaker.

Yet the beauty of the prairie is something that comes to one a bit slowly. It seems to stand aloof, at first, and carry a note of hardness in its far-flung sky-lines. It stuns you with the thought of its immensity. And its very expansiveness gives you an impression of remoteness, of Olympian withdrawals from tiny and tangled-up human destinies. It's only as you live on it and get to know it that you awaken to its loveliness. You learn that it is never monotonous. There are days and weeks, of course, when the prairie itself does not change. But the light above it is always changing, giving new depth to the sky-line, altering the tones of brown and gray along an undulating world-floor, adding enriching new shadows to every land-swell and coulee-slope. Morning breaks over it in splendor and midday bathes it in a blinding white wash of light and evening comes on with a softening beauty all its own. There is, too, something patient and imperial about this prairie country. It is open and lucid and honest. It teaches you to participate in its bigness. And its clear air lifts up your heart just as its wideness of vista leads you out of yourself. It exalts you and humbles you. It has no past, and yet it impresses you as timeless and eternal. It stirs the soul, and yet, as far as I know, it has no literature. That, I suppose, will come later.

Just at present its history is being written, not with the pen, but with the ax and the plow share.

I rather dreaded the thought of Christmas, but it was brightened up by letters from home, a gorgeous box of goodies and a twig of mistletoe from the Wentringer Twins, a rose-colored alpaca jumper from Lady Helen, and an old-fashioned English plum-pudding from Emily Ann, who guardedly wished me as much joy as was possible under the circumstances, explaining that she was now a "general" with an officer's family on the Isle of Wight. I gave Jamie a new pipe and two pairs of home-knitted woolen socks. He started to thank me for them, but stammered and flushed and walked away without finishing up what, apparently, he intended to say. He seemed equally embarrassed when he caught sight of the spray of mistletoe, which I had so craftily hung in the doorway between our kitchen and living-room. But he didn't make any use of it.

My present from Jamie was a pink water-pitcher and a coonskin coat. The coat makes me look like a lady Eskimo but it keeps the winter wind away from my back-bone. It's not exactly new, as Jamie got it in exchange for one of our fat and fresh-killed porkers. He effected the "swap" with the Driwood boys, two improvident English ranchers who "batch it" on a run-down cattle farm a few miles up the Bolton trail. The coat is a little too big and too long for me, but I'm already hard at work making it over. Jamie, it appears, hasn't any too much respect for these same Dri-

wood boys. He calls them sparrows, which is the local term of contempt for the more indolent English *emigré*. And, from what my husband has been telling me, they deserve the name. When the Driwoods started ranching, he informed me, their first team consisted of a mule and a horse. Ronnie, the older brother, thought there would be good money in raising mules. So he purchased two lady-members of this race, only to find one of them, the next morning, strangled to death, owing to the fact that he had tied it up with a slip-knot around its neck. But he was partly consoled, a few days later, when Jamie pointed out to him that mules are never known to have colts. Then the younger brother, Lee, not long afterward, rode the remaining horse into a swamp, from which it couldn't be pulled out in time to save it from drowning. When a successor to this animal was bought it incontinently took sick. The two bewildered bachelors, in order to be in close attendance on their patient, moved their bed out to an empty stall in the horse-stable. As the stable had remained uncleared for a considerable length of time, the bed-posts sank lower and lower until the springs finally came to a rest on the matted ooze beneath them. When Jamie rode over to see what he could do for the two tenderfeet, the next morning, he found my fellow-countrymen fast asleep on a manure-marooned bed in one stall and a dead horse reposing in the next stall.

They also indulged in the luxury of a cow, which, owing to irregular milking, soon went dry. But pa-

tiently and hopefully they fed and tended and tested that bewildered cow, speculating as to when milk would come again, with little thought as to nature's way in the matter. Each brother, it seems, had cut himself, during their first winter, while splitting fire-wood. So they precluded all further accidents of a like nature, while the cold weather lasted, by remaining most of the time in bed. On baking day, however, one of them had to be routed out, to the end that the yeast-batter might be placed in the warm nest left under his blankets. And when news came that their sister was on her way out from England to visit them they borrowed a grain-shovel from Jamie and started cleaning up the shack. For half a day Ronnie carried out rubbish, making a fine pile in the dooryard, a pile which Lee frowningly inspected, a little later, and from which he promptly began retrieving lost treasures. And all that remained to be burned, after the salvaging work had been completed, were a pair of tattered overalls, three worn-out copies of *The Tatler*, and a shovelful of egg-shells.

But my Jamie, I know, will never descend to the sparrow type, no matter what happens. He may have forgotten to be over-neat about his bachelor quarters, and he may be careless about his clothes and indifferent to his immediate surroundings, but he will always have an eye out for the Main Issue. Which doesn't happen to be his wife, of course, but his land. For women don't seem to count much in this country. It's the land

that coaxes and woos men. This fertile northern prairie is still man-hungry. It calls for men, must eventually have men. Millions of virgin acres are waiting for them, like brides in a million beds. And the woman who mates up with one of these wheat-growers seems merely a bride's-maid to a wider sort of marriage, the union of a worker with his land. They function, between their narrow walls, merely that their master may function out on his wider acres. And they, in turn, must produce man-children of their own and give them to the land, the land that recedes and beckons and recedes again like a wilful mistress.

That's why to fail as a farmer stands about the darkest tragedy that could overtake my Jamie. And that's why this present era of idleness, this passing moment of irresponsibility, still impresses me as little more than a gesture of despair.

Day before yesterday a prosperous cattleman, none too elegantly known in this neighborhood as "Bull" McDoel, came to look over our fields and live stock. Bull McDoel, I understand, began his career by rustling Indian cattle, squeezing out an occasional discouraged pioneer, and closing in on impoverished homesteaders. And Bull, I realized when I stood face to face with him, was not ill-named. He's thick-set and heavy and florid-skinned, with a suggestion of taurine strength about his animalized big body and his four-square big face with purple paunches under the shaggy eyebrows. Human beings, I imagine, are little

more than cattle to that man. He has, at any rate, a quick and audacious way of looking a woman over, of shrewdly appraising her as so much meat and bones. He made me feel, as he inspected me, that I might have forgotten to put on my clothes that morning. And he merely laughed when I showed my resentment at that coarsely frank stare of his.

"I'm not crazy about your outfit," he informed me, looking me straight in the eye, "but I could easily get crazy about you."

I tried to meet his glance without flinching.

"I'm not especially interested," I quietly told him, "in the root-sources of your insanity."

He merely laughed again and reached into his pocket for a match.

"You may be, before I'm through with you," he had the effrontery to proclaim. And having lighted a cigar, he blew a cloud of smoke carelessly heavenward.

"Just why do you say that?" I demanded, feeling feral little tingles going up and down my back-bone.

"Because I know women," he coolly retorted. "And I miss my count if you're not still asleep. And by that I mean, lady, that you've never yet been wakened up."

"I'm sufficiently awake," I replied, "to know a cad when I come in contact with one." Then, controlling my rage, I said in the best Nunc-Dimittis tone that I could manage: "Is there anything else you wanted to ask my husband about this ranch?"

"Only this," he said as he reached for his bridle-reins.

"If you go with the outfit it's easily worth two thousand more!"

He laughed again as he rode away. But he left me boiling inside. And Jamie, who was conscious of my depression all evening, said that I was sticking too close to the house again. He even suggested that it was about time for a coyote-hunt, pointing out that the prairie varmints had been getting provokingly bold in the matter of fowl-stealing and proclaiming that a day in the saddle would sweep the cobwebs out of our heads.

My thoughts, naturally, reverted to an English fox-hunt when Jamie announced that he'd ask Lanky Bolton to bring over his dogs, as we'd have to do our hunting with hounds. There came back to me a picture of red coats and tree-shadowed lanes and sleek and well-bred horses and a trained pack of white-and-liver-colored fox-hounds racing across a gray-walled meadow. So what actually greeted me, after an early breakfast the next morning, almost took my breath away. For edging about the corner of the cow-shed was Lanky, a freckled and tawny-haired youth of about eighteen, adorned with a ragged windbreaker and a wide and engaging smile. He was followed by a cluster of five dogs, the tallest and leanest and most unkempt-looking yet seemingly harmless canines I ever cast eyes over. The tallest, a lean and overgrown gray beast, carried a vague suggestion that a Russian wolf-hound had somewhere in the remote past participated

in his ancestry. He looked like an animated question-mark, sharp-nosed and small-ribbed and long-haired. Another, the smallest of the group, showed the trim outlines of a greyhound, with a suggestion of several unknown breeds of dogdom. Two others were of nondescript brindle color, with merely a hint of the hound-breed in their lean and sharp-curved legs. The last was a black brute, big and heavy, the only dog of the five that showed the slightest possibility of any response to affection. This big black, it was easy to see, stood the favorite of his master, for Lanky smilingly introduced him by saying: "This is Blackie. He's the killer of the pack." He fondled him, rather roughly for a moment before adding: "And he's the best coyote hound in these parts."

He may have been, but he didn't look it. That bevy of canine riffraff, in fact, stood as disappointing to the eye as did the two raw-boned and undersized broncos hitched to the top-rail of the corral. The winter coats of our two mounts were of such density that the saddle-girths seemed to sink an inch or two into their bodies. And, as always, the Mexican or stock saddle that was the custom of the prairie-country impressed me as about as cumbersome as a rocking-chair, with its high back and its still higher horn in front. And it still seemed wrong to me, to ride with stirrups the full length of one's legs.

"Just forget you ever rode on one of those English pancakes," announced Jamie as he swung me up into

the saddle, where I felt as though I were easing myself into a bowl.

But I forgot, as we struck out for the open range north of the ranch, to be critical of my mount. He was, Jamie proudly proclaimed, as good a bronco as ever carried a saddle. "I've ridden that bronc eighty miles in one day," he added. "So don't try to hold him when we jump a coyote. Just give him his head and hang on!"

A Chinook had lapped up the snow, so we were loping over road-allowances and grazing-lands of a bleached-looking brown, until we came to the open range, with no fences to interfere with us. Jamie, on his rough-coated bay, rode at my side, with Lanky close behind, followed by his scattering of dejected-looking hounds. But Jamie, I noticed, wasn't giving much attention to me. That telescopic eye of his seemed to be always scanning the prairie, first in one direction, then in another. Yet nothing came of it all.

"Your dogs don't seem in any hurry about locating a scent," I said to my husband, a little of my exhilaration ebbing away.

"These hounds run only by sight," Jamie called back to me. "It's fox-hounds that run by scent."

"I'm sorry," I said, wondering why Lanky was swinging off to one side of us. And a moment later I knew the reason why.

"Coyote! Coyote!" that youth was shrilling in a high and Indian-like cry. And his five hounds must

have known what he meant, for they leaped forward as though they had been shot out of a Big Bertha. I looked in the direction toward which Jamie was heading and about half a mile away I could make out a vague gray shape trotting across the prairie. The hounds, the next moment, must have caught sight of their quarry, for they flattened out and raced away, with the famous Blackie, I noticed, considerably in the rear of the others.

"Come on," shouted Jamie over his shoulder, for once forgetting himself in a moment of excitement. And I went on, no longer in doubt as to the best way of doing it. For my bronco leaped out with an abruptness that nearly snapped my head off my shoulders. He took the bit in his teeth and stretched into a speed that made my spine crinkle. His one and only aim in life, I could see, was to overhaul those dogs.

I'd been in hunts before, but never in one as noiseless as this. The big hounds, running by sight, gave no tongue. The only sound of which I was conscious was the wind whistling in my ears and the staccato pounding of the horses' feet. And as I slowly but surely overhauled Jamie I realized that he had, after all, given me the best bronco. But I would have felt a trifle easier in my mind if I'd been surer of the ground over which we were racing. It seemed as though every badger-hole on the prairie lay directly in my path. Once, as we swept over a knoll fairly perforated with those perilous foot-traps, I closed my eyes and pre-

pared for the worst. But on we flew. We went like the wind, with Lanky now a little in the lead and Jamie trying in vain to keep up with his tenderfoot wife. When I saw an especially large and dangerous-looking hole loom right in my path, I instinctively tried to pilot my mount to one side. And it was as I tugged violently on my right rein that it happened.

Just how it happened I never knew. But the forequarters of my bronco dropped abruptly under me. The little brute seemed to run for a short space of time on his knee-bones, then suddenly up-ended and turned me over in as neat a somersault as equestrienne ever accomplished. I felt a thump, beheld a small constellation of stars, and wondered where I was.

But I was on my feet again, slightly dazed and breathless, by the time Jamie came riding up. My bronco was unconcernedly nipping the short buffalo-grass within a biscuit-toss of where I stood.

"I told you to give him his head," said Jamie, when I refused to let him feel for broken bones.

"Well, he most assuredly had his head," was my somewhat indignant reply. "I only tried to keep him out of a badger-hole."

"Never bother about badger-holes with a running horse," explained Jamie. "Let him do his own picking. Steering away from one hole would only mean pulling him into another."

"It's a bit like matrimony, isn't it?" I suggested.

But that observation was lost on Jamie, who turned

me about and still again asked me if I was hurt. And, when assured that I wasn't, he suggested changing mounts, which I willingly enough agreed to. I mightn't be in on the kill; but I'd already been close enough to one of my own.

The hounds, by the time the stirrups had been adjusted and the exchange effected, were no longer in sight. But Lanky and his dogs reappeared, half an hour later, looking none too triumphant as they came panting and straggling back across the prairie. So off we started again. And within a quarter of an hour another coyote was sighted and the chase was on again.

I was giving little thought, this time, to badger-holes. My new mount was a bit more jolting in his stride, but by urging him on I could keep almost within shouting distance of Lanky and Jamie. I could see the hounds drawing closer and closer to our fleeing prairie-warbler, with the big Russian wolf-hound leading, then the greyhound, then the two brindles, with the over-praised Blackie still bringing up the rear. And there was a thrill in watching those straining dogs draw closer and closer to the fleeing gray shadow in front of them. Now and then I could hear Lanky's shout of encouragement. And even the horses seemed to respond to that Sioux-like cry. Yet we raced on for another half-mile, nip and tuck, with the valorous shadow still heading for the sky-line. I could see the graceful curve of his back and the quick liveness of his leg-movements as he went. And a pang of pity went through me as the

dogs drew closer and closer, with the big lead-hound almost on our quarry's heels. But the coyote dodged suddenly to one side, the following pack curved and dispersed and became compact again, once more relentlessly close to those flying heels.

The second time the coyote swerved to one side, however, he found himself disconcertingly close to the greyhound, and as he wavered the two brindles leaped forward. He seemed, for a moment, hemmed in on all sides. But he intended, apparently, to die game, twisting and dodging and avoiding the great snapping jaws as he struggled forward. It wasn't until he reached the center of a little valley, hemmed in by two small and rock-studded hills, that he realized further flight to be useless. He swung about, his forefeet braced, his tail held close between his hind legs, his dripping tongue hanging red from between milk-white fangs. He took on, with death staring him in the face, a forlorn air of magnificence. And I suddenly felt sorry for him.

"Oh, Jamie, save him!" I found myself crying as I rode up to the scene of battle.

But Jamie didn't seem to hear me. He had swung down from his horse and was dancing rather ridiculously about the circling dogs while the tawny-haired youth known as Lanky seemed equally lost to reason. For at that moment the Russian wolfhound leaped forward, bowling the coyote completely over. He was on his feet again, in an instant, but one brindle,

in that split second, had seized him by the side of his neck and the other brindle had possessed himself of a hind leg.

What came next was merely a sickening and struggling heap of coyote and canines. Once I saw the bushy tail of the prairie-warbler wave aloft, as valorous as the bullet-riddled colors of the Princess Pats at Ypres. But it was too late. I saw, when I looked back at the scene of battle, that the other dogs had fallen away a little, in a momentary silence, while the mysteriously efficient Blackie locked his great jaws in a death-grip on the coyote's throat.

I turned away, a little ashamed of it all, ashamed of Jamie's excitement and Lanky's yodeling and the silver-gray body stretched out on the prairie-grass and Blackie's heaving sides and foam-flecked jaws as he gazed with a satisfied look up into his master's face.

"Here's your first pelt," announced Jamie as he stepped forward and lifted the dead coyote up by the tail.

And when I slowly and contemptuously said "Brutes!" as I leaned on my saddle-horn for support, the bewildered Lanky exchanged a fraternal glance with my lord-and-master and muttered: "Isn't that just like a woman?"

Chapter Thirteen

THE New Year is, I know, usually the time for the turning over of a new leaf. But the calendar doesn't seem to count for much when you're marooned on a prairie wheat-ranch. And the old problems continue. It's only in your romantic-minded youth, apparently, that life's Big Moments leap down on you, leopard-like, from the shadowy bough of the unexpected. And Time, while it pacifies, can also paucify.

I'd even been trying to explain to Jamie how, since our happiness is equal to our resources divided by our wants, a lady situated as I was must in some way diminish her wants in order to increase her quotient. But Jamie, instead of leaning an attentive ear to my philosophizing, on that dolorous last day of our Old Year, casually announced that we were pretty badly in need of stove-coal. And if our fuel-pile was unexpectedly low it was due, I suspected, to the fact that an over-prodigious tenderfoot had been trying to keep herself too luxuriously warm. So he frowningly suggested that we take the day off and team over to Grover's Creek for a fresh supply of fuel.

We have coal in abundance underlying our own ranch-land, but it is poor in quality, not easy to get at, and exasperatingly hard to keep burning. By paying a dollar a ton, Jamie explained, we could get a load of

much better coal from a creek-bluff over on the Grover property, have a blue-doming day on the sun-washed winter prairie, and be home some time before midnight.

So we promptly rustled food for man and beast, stowed it away in our big wagon-box, and started off across a rolling prairie that seemed to stretch away into infinitude. The weather was once more clear and cold, and I was glad enough of my coonskin coat, to say nothing of the heavy horse-blankets about my knees. We talked, on the way over, of everything under the sun, from the passing of the Indian to the appeal of Shelley's poetry, from the history of the wheat-berry to the educational system of England, which Jamie holds to be all wrong, with its sanctification of what we erroneously call the Public School and its anachronistic accent on social caste. And while Jamie converted himself into a fairly good imitation of a chimney-sweep, as he loaded his coal, I made a fire of driftwood from the creek-bank and boiled our coffee and cooked our eggs and quite forgot that it was several degrees below zero.

It was rather late in the afternoon, in fact, before we started for home. And the going, with our heavy load and a frozen-rutted trail, was slower than Jamie himself had expected. We even had to stop beside an ice-covered coulee, just after sunset, where Jamie chopped a hole and watered his horses, blanketed and fed them, and confessed to a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. So we had hot coffee and roast-pork

sandwiches on the trail again, and once more started off across a lone and twilight country where the occasional far-off smoke-plume of a ranch-house only deepened the desolation about us. We seemed alone in a world where life had put out the light and gone to bed. But I felt strangely contented, sitting there beside my pipe-smoking companion, who talked less and less as the night deepened around us. And I knew it would be long after midnight before Jamie could milk his restless cows and feed his stock.

I was satisfied to sit there and study the stars which seemed bigger and brighter than I'd ever before seen them, notwithstanding the white splashes of the Aurora Borealis along the northern sky-line. And it was just after I'd inquired of Jamie if he knew which was Orion, and which were the Pleiades, that I remembered something.

I asked Jamie what time it was.

Jamie stopped the horses, dug out his big silver turnip of a watch, studied the dial in the starlight and announced that it was two minutes to twelve.

"Then we've two minutes to wait," I explained. But he didn't seem to know what I was driving at. He merely knocked out his pipe, tucked it away and sat there beside me staring up at the star-spangled heavens.

"That must be Jupiter," he said, quiet-voiced, and touched into awe, plainly enough, by the splendor of all those wheeling orbs. I didn't answer him, for his face was still turned heavenward and I realized that

my two minutes were up. Instead, I stood up, leaned abruptly over him and kissed him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked almost harshly.

"It's New Year's, Jamie," I answered, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. "People always do that, on the stroke of twelve to-night."

I'd often pictured him, in my wifely desolation, as taking me in his arms, as crushing me against that great body of his and whispering foolishly tender words in my ear. So I waited, with my heart in my mouth, feeling the moment was in some way an epochal one. But Jamie, after a second prolonged and perplexed scrutiny of my face, merely leaned forward and picked up his reins.

"We'll get along better," he quietly observed, "without that sort of thing."

"Why?" I asked, trying to speak as quietly as he had. But my voice was a trifle shaky.

"Because it doesn't seem to be a part of the arrangement," he said as his team started forward again.

That speech gave me a minute or two of none too pleasant thought.

"But what's the arrangement worth," I was able to ask, "if you hate me that way?"

"I didn't say I hated you," averred Jamie. "But I could see by your face, that first night I brought you home, how it was all wrong. I saw terror in your eyes. And that taught me something I needed to know."

"Perhaps I've got over that," I finally found the courage to suggest.

But Jamie, apparently, was following his own line of thought. "I'd no right to ask a woman to marry that way," he solemnly proclaimed. "No man has. It's—it's like snatching for something you've never really earned."

"But isn't love the one thing you don't have to earn?" I demanded.

And it was Jamie's turn to give thought to another's speech.

"It has to be a partnership, I imagine. And people, apparently, can't be crowbarred into it."

It was over twenty below zero, on the open prairie, but I could feel a hot flush pursue its way up and down my body.

"Then what are we going to do?" I asked, not quite able to control the quaver in my voice. "We can't, of course, go on like this."

Jamie sat silent as we rumbled along a deep-rutted trail that skirted a frozen swamp.

"I know I'm not easy to put up with," he finally said. "And I know how you must feel about living as we do. But couldn't we just mark time until this ranch muddle gets cleared up? I'd feel less of an impostor then."

"An impostor?" I cried.

And Jamie solemnly wagged his head.

"I've had so cursed little to offer you," he protested. "But I mightn't be as black a failure as you've been

led to believe. And once I'm on my feet again, I can grow the best wheat that ever came out of the ground."

It seemed bewilderingly unlike Jamie, to sit boasting of his powers and his far-off possibilities. But I let it pass. I remembered how big a man's work must loom in his life when that life held so little beyond what toil brought in to him. He was a wheat-grower, and he loved his wheat. Yet I nursed a ghostly sort of jealousy of the grain that seemed always to come first in his thoughts.

"Very well," I said, feeling very small beside the shaggy-coated figure so close to me and yet so far away. "If it has to be that sort of partnership I've no intention of stepping from under. I'll do what I can to help. And I'll also do what I can to control my feelings."

He turned, at the rising note of bitterness in my voice, as though trying to study my face in the semi-darkness.

"That's *my* job," he grimly proclaimed. He was referring, obviously, to the problem of keeping all impulses of the flesh in leash.

"If you have any to control," I amended, with a sharpness which I promptly regretted.

For Jamie turned on me again, as though to cry out against that over-sweeping charge. But, instead of speaking, he merely tightened his reins and speeded up his tired horses. And he remained determinedly silent until we were once more back at Journey's End. He

even seemed a little afraid of me, when he came in from his belated chores. Or perhaps he was a little afraid of himself. After winding up the alarm-clock, at any rate, he hesitated for a moment or two in his doorway. Then he rather clumsily reminded me that I'd had a hard day of it and asked if I wouldn't care to sleep in the next morning.

But even that rough kindness, I found, was harder to bear than his cruelty. It brought a still darker wave of desolation sweeping through me.

"Oh, I'll be on the job," I said with purely protective brusqueness.

"Wouldn't you like the curate?" Jamie asked as he studied my face, which must have been pretty gray and pinched with the cold. The "curate" was our household name for a worn fire-brick which could be heated in the oven and slipped into a padded covering and placed at the foot of a bed for the sake of warmth. And I smiled, in spite of myself, at the thought of that attenuated consolation for perilously lonely ladies.

"I'd rather have you," I abandonedly averred.

But Jamie didn't seem to hear me. There was a Rock-of-Gibraltar look about his face that warned me he was still groping through some clinging fog of uncertainty. And I'd already broken a promise, I remembered, about keeping my feelings under control.

So there was nothing for me to do but go sedately to my own room, where, after sixteen long hours in the open air, I eventually fell asleep. I fell asleep while a

prairie-warbler sang dolefully from a neighboring knoll and some ghost of sorely wounded womanhood whimpered in my tired heart.

But I was up and dressed, four hours later, though Jamie was already out and away at his work. He looked fagged, when he came in at noon, protesting that he hadn't slept overly well, a calamity which he casually attributed to too much coffee the day before. But I caught him, more than once, covertly studying my face. He sat across the table, within two paces of me, but I could sense the polar barrier that loomed between us. Our hands almost touched, when I passed him a cup of tea. But an ice-wall of remoteness stood between us. And it didn't add to my happiness to remember that I was compelled to respect an unreasonable man's moods. I felt rather trapped and helpless. Yet there was nothing to be done. For there's no sadder waste of energy, I've found, than to use the weapons of reason against the unreasoning.

But we are, I find, such helpless and pitiful little puppets, played on by nature for her own far-off and faintly discerned ends. And this mortal flesh of ours, I've learned, can't be entirely overlooked. Pain humbles us, and fear leaves us meek. The silence of the night steals away our courage. And even a howling coyote can hurl that inner and sacred thing we call the spirit down in the dust of desperation.

For, following my lord-and-master's example the next evening, I'd gone to bed early if somewhat list-

lessly, to make up for my lost sleep of the night before. But slumber seemed beyond me. To add to the nervous tension that kept me awake, a coyote began to howl through the darkness. Never before had I heard a prairie-warbler so close to us. He seemed to be within a stone's throw of our outbuildings. And he sounded like a lost soul, mourning over the sins that had corrupted his hope.

I could picture him out there, sitting on his haunches, his nose pointed toward the heavens, howling out his derisive song of hate and sorrow. And as the night deepened he seemed to come nearer, curdling my blood with his prolonged and mournful call. I suspected, at first, that he had come for one of my prematurely hatched ducklings. Then I concluded that he was after one of our wabbly-legged little calves. Then I began to feel that he was waiting for *me*, that he was creeping, white-fanged, closer and closer in the darkness, and that in the end I would stand powerless to drive him off.

Wave after wave of the unreasoning terror of midnight swept through my body. And the last of my pride was swallowed up in panic. I sat up in bed, shaking, and called loudly for Jamie.

He came, almost at once, with a lighted candle in his hand, clacking across the floor-boards in his loose slippers, looking huge and Goth-like in his old gray flannel dressing-gown. His hair was rumpled and his face wore a pucker of anxiety as he stooped over me.

"What's the matter?" he asked in that strong and solemn and reassuring man's voice of his. And I felt better even to know that he stood somewhere near me.

"It's that coyoté. He's—he's driving me crazy!"

Jamie stood thoughtful, for a moment or two, and then put down his candle. Then he crossed to the window and looked out. Then he came back to me.

"This won't do," he proclaimed. "You're shaking." And I thought, in my blindness, that he was going to get in bed with me and take me in his arms. But he turned frowningly toward the room-corner where his rifle stood.

"Shall I have a shot at him?" he quietly inquired.

"I think you'd better shoot me," I said as I turned my face to the wall.

But Jamie, after a full half-minute of puzzled thought, went out and had his shot at the prairie skulker. And the howling stopped. And I lay alone in the darkness, wondering what it would be like to feel a man's breath on the back of your neck and his heart beating strong and slow against your shoulder-blade, while your quieted body drank in the warmth and strength of a stronger body as sleep stole over you. And what it would be like to waken in the night, and know your mate is still there, close beside you, to keep and protect you from the Piegans and the prairie-wolves and the ghouls and the ghostly fears and the midnight desolation of spirit that comes to the best of us.

Chapter Fourteen

I've been thinking a great deal, these last few days, about Home, or rather, what used to be Home. It was Hugh's letter, I fancy, that turned my thoughts back to older scenes and older days that already begin to take on a daguerreotypic mistiness.

Hughie imagines that I'm not happy, and seems to be worrying about me. But my colors are still flying. I'm determined that, in some way or other, I'm going to carry on. I'll find a way or make it. My head may be bloody, but it remains unbowed. And I've no intention of botanizing on the grave of lost dignities.

I seem, however, to be reverting to type. Nature, apparently, has a way of knocking the over-fastidious off their feet. And if I've got to go through a system of barbarization I'm going to be as blithe as the gods will allow.

Jamie's quiet tolerance for his feather-headed mate, in fact, rather reminds me of the patience of a Great Dane pestered by an over-rowdy child. For he knows well enough that life can't be all beer and skittles. There may be some consolation in finding that we can't be turned into a cold, cold world overnight; but we still have to live. It's a law of this country, I'm told, that a farmer can't be put off his land between the months of November and May.

That's a sort of armistice-period, where the winters can be so relentless, to prevent undue suffering among the destitute. And a farmer, it seems, can't be deprived of the essential implements of living, such as a bed and a cooking stove and a horse-team to work his land. But, since we have no bank-account, Jamie is forced to barter what remains of his Number-Two wheat for what we need to carry on. It took one load to get new tires and a license for his car and another load to pay for the new blankets and sheets I simply had to have. And I slimmed my own roll, as they say in Elk Crossing, by buying Jamie a pound of English pipe-tobacco when he'd so foolishly decided that smoking was a luxury beyond his means. For, whatever happens, we can't starve, though I may be a bit fed up on boiled turnips and fail to show much enthusiasm over under-sized prunes and evaporated apples. When we get tired of turnips we turn back to beans. And when we grow a-weary of pork we sally forth and shoot prairie-chicken, which can be brought down from the stack-tops about our own outbuildings.

Yesterday, for one delusively hopeful hour, it even looked as though our problems had been solved, with our local cattle-king posing as the god from the machine. For Bull McDoel came riding over and talked with Jamie about a plan he had worked out. He was, it seems, willing to shoulder the ranch mortgages, meet our different outstanding notes and put Jamie on a yearly salary, provided my husband was willing to let

McDoel take over all stock and implements that remained on the ranch and work the land as his own. That meant, of course, being a hired man. But there was one other condition, to which I remained a stranger until the ruddy-faced and well-fed Mr. McDoel came in and talked to me.

He told me what he had suggested to Jamie. And he ended up by saying: "I s'pose you know just about how pig-headed that partner of yours can be?"

"You mean he doesn't agree with your plans?" I ventured.

"He can swallow everything but one condition," was the unexpected answer. "But if you've got the brains I think you have, you'll soon put him right on that."

My intellect, I retorted, was sometimes a source of disappointment to me. But, with fit and proper meekness, I inquired as to the nature of the one remaining obstacle.

"It's you," acknowledged Bull McDoel.

"Why me?" I asked, disturbed by the thought that I might yet be standing between Jamie and his happiness.

"Because it was my suggestion," proclaimed that red-faced plutocrat of the plains so coolly confronting me, "that when this thing goes through you should come over and run my house for me. It's the best house in this part of Alberta. It's got a piano, and three bathrooms, and running hot and cold water. But

I'm sick o' seeing nothing but a yellow-faced Chinaman around."

I said, as I digested my shock, that I was afraid I might get lost in such a sea of plumbing. But my levity was lost on that obtuse conquistador.

"Hell," proclaimed the plutocrat, "you were made for that sort of thing. You're not crazy about a dump like this, and you know it. You're doing without the things every decent woman's got to have."

I sat down, not from shock, but in a meek and lowly effort to keep my thoughts straight. I didn't want to stand between my husband and his final hope of success. I didn't care to prove the weak link in the chain of promise. But I found it hard to picture myself as the *maitresse de maison* for a rotund cattle-breeder who had grown rich by capitalizing the misfortunes of his discouraged neighbors.

Yet there was something consoling in the mere fact of being wanted. To be desired: that is the first hunger in every woman's heart. And a second hunger, almost as strong, is the craving to show the unresponsive man of her choice that others are not altogether blind to her attractions.

I was even able to smile as I looked up at my waiting visitor.

"But I might be ~~more~~ ornamental than useful," I suggested.

"I'm willing to take a chance on that," promptly proclaimed the cattle-king.

"And I mightn't be easy to get along with," I further suggested.

"I like 'em high-spirited," announced my taurine visitor.

"Then I'll have to talk it over with my husband," I dutifully explained.

"You'd be happier in a good home," pursued McDoel, "than in drifting round with a broken-down rancher."

"Why should we be drifting around?" I asked.

"Because you can't possibly stay on this land," was the cool-noted reply. "And Big Jim knows it."

I fought in vain against the spirit of homelessness that engulfed me. And I even endured, without protest, the over-penetrative gaze of the man so placidly studying me.

"I'll let you know what we decide," I said, with the accent on the "we."

"Well, don't wait too long," suggested my rubicund friend as he picked up his gauntlets. But I breathed easier, for some reason, when the door had swung shut on him.

I was still in a brown study when Jamie came in, ten minutes later, and hung his worn old wolf-skin overcoat up on its peg. I had the feeling, as he turned and stood watching me, that the issue not only had to be faced but also had to be forced.

"Are you going to take McDoel's offer?" I asked, speaking as casually as I could.

His answer was not a direct one.

"His lordship," he proclaimed instead, "has just offered me a lump sum; cash down, for what's left of my stock and implements. He knows, of course, they're already covered by a chattel mortgage. And taking an offer like that would mean that I'd have to skip across the Line, the same as the other down-and-outers do when they're caught at crooked dealing."

"Then we mustn't be down-and-outers," I quietly affirmed. "And McDoel's first offer seems an answer to our problem."

"If it had been an honest one," scoffed Jamie.

"Are you going to take it?" I asked.

He turned on me sharply.

"Are *you*?" he demanded.

"I've been thinking it over," I acknowledged, "and I don't see why I shouldn't."

"But do you know what it means?"

"It means, as far as I can see, a chance of keeping this ranch and letting you go on with your work."

"At the price of your self-respect," cried Jamie, with altogether unlooked-for vigor.

But I could afford to smile at his bitterness.

"I've found that keeping house for a man," I quietly affirmed, "can be done on quite an impersonal basis."

Jamie winced at that, as I'd expected him to do. But it wasn't long before a dangerously granitic line hardened about that lean jaw-bone of his.

"So that's all this means to you?" he cried.

"I'm afraid it is," I forced myself to say. "I'm only doing what any Chinaman could do. And I can't see that it would make much difference."

I was rewarded by a dark flush that was anger and something more than anger.

"You mean that Bull McDoel and his money looks more attractive to you?" demanded my husband.

I declined to answer.

It was Jamie who broke the silence. And when he finally spoke, it was in an oddly altered voice.

"I haven't given you much of a break, have I?" he said with his cavernous brown eyes fixed solemnly on my face.

"I was thinking of the future," I answered with deliberated matter-of-factness. But I had the feeling, as I looked into Jamie's haggard and humbled face, of a swimmer who had got uncomfortably beyond his depth.

"Would you be willing to leave that future in my hands for a few weeks?" he asked, after still another silence.

"Why?" I questioned, behind my flimsy barricade of indifference.

And Jamie's reply, impassioned as it was, didn't prove an altogether unwelcome one.

"Because I prefer my own wife under my own roof," he cried as he turned away and reached with a somewhat unsteady hand for his old wolf-skin overcoat.

Chapter Fifteen

I HAVE left things in Jamie's hands. But the results, so far, have not been impressive. And the issue seems more clouded than ever.

For I've just learned, through Lanky Bolton, that the Gilson household is not so remote as I'd imagined from the concern of its neighbors. When Jamie was hauling the last of his wheat in to the Crossing, it seems, he had a none too happy encounter with a half-drunken cow-hand from the McDoel ranch. This trouble-maker, who answered to the name of Spike Forgan, not only intimated that Jamie and I had never actually enjoyed the benefit of clergy but also proclaimed that his cattle-king boss was about to corral my humble self as his pastry-mixer for the coming summer. And the result, apparently, was a prompt and Homeric fist-fight.

Jamie, I was given to understand, was the undoubted victor. But from that victory he seemed to wring little happiness, coming home as he did with a shockingly bruised right hand and a spirit so correspondingly bruised that he preferred remaining stubbornly silent about it all. I am, however, adhering to my mud-lark rôle and refusing to worry. I may have solved none of my problems but I'm still carrying on and keeping a stiff upper lip. And spring will soon be here.

March is already more than half gone, and that means, of course, our armistice-time is almost over, but I'm letting the future take care of itself. We may be bivouacking to the brink of a precipice, or picnicking in a graveyard, if you prefer putting it that way, but I'm still pinning my hopes on To-morrow. We have, for the past two months, been doing without things, many things, essential to most men and women. We have no luxuries, and, I suppose, few comforts, and my last two nightgowns were made out of sadly worn sheets, with a single rosebud worked in red silk thread on the bosom of each, to signify *le panache* in the ragged cap of courage. For I feel stronger, in some way, than ever before. There are days when I seem over-dangerously alive, in fact, and rather wish my grim-eyed Jamie wouldn't be so guardedly solicitous about his grab-bag wife. But he agreed with me, the other day, that things mau' be waur. He even acknowledged there were prairie folks considerably worse off than ourselves. And that led him to explain that some neighbors of ours, known as the Tiptons, had a four-day-old baby in their shack and no fresh milk or butter for the bedridden mother. And that, in turn, prompted me to forget my own sorry lot and do something for others. I owed that much to the battered order of womanhood, I felt as I busied myself making broth and baking a custard and laying aside a few yards of flannelette which I knew would not come in amiss. Then my somewhat bewildered Jamie saddled Buck-

shot and helped me pack my things in a pair of improvised saddle-bags and off I started for the Tipton ranch.

It was a long ride and a cold one, with a ragged sky overhead and a disturbingly sharp wind cutting across the shelterless slopes of the winter-end prairie. But I soon forgot my own discomfort, an hour later, in facing the squalor and neglect that surrounded a helpless mother and babe, with nothing more than a dazed and half-useless child of twelve, who went by the name of Aggie, to look after them.

It wasn't long, however, before I had the broken-lidded stove going like mad, a kettle of hot water steaming a-top it, and a tub of unclean clothing and bed-linen ready for the soap and scrub-board. I warmed my broth and fed the hollow-eyed mother; I washed dishes and diapers; I scrubbed the table-tops and the floor-boards; I even bathed the baby, holding that slippery little pink body on a blanket beside the singing stove. And I did it with a grim and resolute sort of calmness, realizing that I too was one of that forlorn sisterhood of prairie exiles who, whether ready for it or not, might have to bow to the inexorable law of life and face their time when it is upon them. But I at least brought order and cleanness into that lone little prairie home.

And my day, I knew as I made ready to start back to my own shack, had not been an entirely wasted one. I had found out what it feels like to

hold a small and helpless bundle of life in one's arms. And I had learned a little of the heroism, the unbugled and quietly accepted heroism, of those frontier women who give what is demanded of them that the race may go on. This country, young as it may seem, is already salted with their bones. And, O pioneers, I salute you! Being a woman, I bow meekly before those women who have given so much and gained so little. Yet I may be wrong. Perhaps, in the secret places of their souls, they reaped a glory we know nothing of.

I had intended, while busy at the Tiptons', to await the return of the master of the house, who had teamed in to Elk Crossing for supplies. But when I looked out and saw that it had started to snow, at the oncoming of evening, I decided it was time for me to be on my way back. So I made a final survey of the shack, gave my final instructions to Aggie, and kissed good-by a much more contented babe, not to mention its mother.

I was glad to mount Buckshot and head for home. But the snow, I noticed, was coming down thicker than I had expected. Instead of falling softly, though, it was being driven in streaky lines across the prairie. And, as the wind increased in violence, it beat more and more stingingly against my face. It even tried to bully me into drifting along with it. But Buckshot, of course, knew better. Yet when I glanced about, to get my bearings, it finally dawned on me that every landmark had been obliterated in a driving gray blanket

of snow. I seemed the last survivor on a storm-lashed world reeling drunkenly down through sunless gulfs of space. And the darkness increased as Buckshot and I struggled on.

It was too late in the winter, I kept telling myself, for a real blizzard. The end of March, I remembered, marked the opening of spring in England, the passing of frosts and the first unfolding of buds. And even on the prairie, I argued, the season could not entirely turn traitor. But Buckshot, I noticed, found it harder and harder to make his way through the ever-deepening drifts. And the snow, sharp as the tooth of hate, beat with increasing fury against my face. I even found it hard to breathe, when the stronger gusts of wind went tearing past me. All I could do was to bend low over the saddle-horn and give my bronco his head. I could no longer see trail or correction-line, fence or road-allowance. Yet Buckshot, I maintained, would in some way know the road home. I was in his keeping. And his animal instinct, I kept telling myself, would take him in the right direction.

But my helplessness depressed me. We seemed to ride for miles and miles, through an empty and roaring wilderness, without coming to anything. I could see no shadowy farm-buildings, no friendly lighted window. And I began to get afraid.

"Oh, Buckshot," I cried, "I'm banking on you. You surely wouldn't fail me, would you?"

But the writhing body under me merely wallowed

on through the snow. Whether he was going right or wrong was beyond my power to determine. I tried to peer through the darkness, but the powdery crystals that beat against my face only made my eyelids smart. And past me, on cyclonic little whirls of the wind, streamed an army of gray ghosts, whining like lost souls as they flung themselves face-down on the ever-deepening drifts. My body was warm enough, from the motion of the horse under me, but my fingers grew so cold that I had to shift the reins from one gauntleted hand to the other. I found relief, too, in withdrawing my chilled feet from the wooden stirrups now and then, for, when hanging free, the blood seemed to circulate more easily through my half-numbed toes. My saddle was wet and my legs were damp, where the heat of two warm-blooded bodies kept melting the in-wedging snow. And even Buckshot would stop occasionally and toss his hairy head, apparently to fling the ever-congealing hoar-frost from his face.

But we wallowed on.

We floundered up and down slopes, in and out of snow-filled hollows, past mysterious white mounds that might have been midnight graves or merely drift-covered grain-stooks. We went on, alone in an empty and wind-lashed world. I could feel my courage ebb away, and, rather than surrender to blind panic, I began to talk to Buckshot. I patted his neck and called out words of cheer to him as he strained forward. I told him how in half an hour he would have a brim-

ming half-peck of oats and I would have a steaming pot of coffee. I even tried to sing to him. But the wind blew those foolish sounds back over my shoulder. And Buckshot, coming to a higher drift, had trouble enough of his own as he fought his way, belly-deep, through that eddying and engulfing whiteness. But he got through, at last. And we wallowed on again.

"Take me home, Buckshot," I said to that dumb and faithful animal. "Take me home to my Jamie again!"

I refused to give up hope. But my valor was only a childish sort of pretending. For reason told me that I had been long enough in the saddle to reach home an hour ago, if our course had been laid true. I had ridden, it seemed, for countless miles and miles. And it seemed folly, at last, even to pretend. I had to face the fact, in the end, that we were lost, hopelessly lost. I even wondered if my Jamie would be sorry, and if he wouldn't get along better, after all, without the problems and the disappointments that his grab-bag wife had brought him.

Then Buckshot himself seemed to lose the last of his prairie-bred fighting spirit. For he stopped short and refused to go on again. He stood, four-square to the wind, and lifted his poor old tired head and knickered. I accepted that knicker as the final cry of protest from a beast who can do no more. And I remembered, consolingly, that people who die of cold do not suffer for long. I wondered if it would be best to burrow like a prairie-chicken into a snow-drift and

quietly await the end. And I asked myself if, when the storm had beaten itself out and the sun shone again, some wandering horseman would find two mounds on the open prairie,—and one of them would be all that remained of Joan Alicia Eustis, who once wanted to live, and in some way make herself worthy of a good man's love.

Then Buckshot knickered again, louder than before.

And down the wind, muffled and remote, came an answering whinny.

I thought, at first, that I was dreaming, that I was making my forlorn little wish the father of the thought. But even as I hesitated I saw a gray shadow loom closer through the grayness and a man on horseback swing up beside me.

It was my Jamie.

"Are you all right?" he called into the wind that tore between us.

I couldn't answer him, for a moment. I had to get my feet back on a world to which I'd said good-by. And even after that I had to wait until a foolish quaver of weakness eddied out of my body. And Jamie, pressing closer, repeated his question.

"Yes, I'm all right," I cried, and added with a gulp of something that was more than relief, "now I've got you."

"We're about a mile from the shack," explained Jamie. "I knew Buckshot'd bring you back. But

when this howler came on I got worried. Are you warm?"

"Yes, I'm warm," I called back. "But couldn't you come a little closer?"

Jamie swung closer, so that our snow-pelted legs were pressed together between the two wet bodies of our mounts, with the stinging crystals flying between our faces.

But Jamie's mind was still on the main issue.

"I'll break trail," he proclaimed. "And you follow up as close as you can. Ten minutes' time should see us safe indoors."

I no longer worried, with Jamie there in front of me. And I saw to it that no space widened between us. I even insisted on staying out with him while he rubbed down his horses and gave Buckshot a well-earned meal. I wanted, as never before, to be near my husband. I was glad to cling to his arm as we fought our way from the stable to the shack door.

But, before opening that door, he stopped short and confronted me.

"I've had to take a sparrow in for the night," he rather hesitatingly said to me.

I couldn't, for a moment or two, understand what he meant. And then I remembered that a "sparrow" meant an old-countryman, an Englishman.

"Who is he?" I asked, with a vague tinge of disappointment, for I had counted, after that ordeal in the open, on having my Jamie all to myself.

"A sad-eyed tenderfoot I hadn't the heart to put out, in weather like this," was Jamie's answer as he beat the snow from his coat-front and reached for the door-knob.

A man was sitting in front of the stove, as we went in, with his back to us. His pose seemed an oddly passive one. But he got up from his chair, promptly enough, when he heard us. Then he turned slowly about, in the none too lucid lamplight.

I found myself standing face to face with Hugh Wentringer.

He looked tired and thin and uncertain of himself. There was even a vague air of pleading in his eyes as they rested on me. He seemed to be telling me, without speaking, that he wasn't entirely responsible for his presence there.

"This is Mrs. Gilson, my wife," explained Jamie as he continued to shake the snow from his wolf-skin greatcoat.

"How d'you do," said Hugh, rather stiffly, as he held out a none too steady hand.

"How d'you do," I echoed as I shook hands with him, equally embarrassed.

Yet I was sorry, the moment I had spoken. For, plainly enough, I was participating in a deception. We were accosting each other as two strangers might. And it wasn't, I remembered, being quite fair and honest with Jamie.

But the moment slipped by and the mistake was al-

lowed to stand. It was fatigue, I fancy, that left me passive before an issue that still seemed clouded. I had been through too much, that day, to give much thought to the social values of candor. I was too tired even to think.

"My wife," explained Jamie as he helped me off with my things, "has had a pretty hard ride across the prairie. And what she needs now is a good hot supper."

"I'm sorry," said Hugh, with altogether unnecessary stiffness.

"Sorry about what?" I challenged, surprised at the sharpness in my own voice.

"Sorry that you had to face such weather," answered my slightly perplexed fellow-countryman.

"I'm all right," I protested. But I was glad enough to sink into the chair Jamie held for me.

His ceremoniousness, I suspected, was largely protectional.

"Can we induce you to join us in a second supper, Mr. ——"

My husband, still foolishly formal, hesitated and turned from Hugh to me and back to Hugh again.

"Pardon me, but what did you say the name was?"

Hugh stood silent a moment. He seemed reluctant, as he waited, to meet my eye.

"Wentringer," he finally said, "Hugh Wentringer."

He said it almost challengingly. And I could see, as he spoke, that he had faced a temptation and had over-

come it. It was an effort, though a belated one, to efface a masquerade that must have begun to impress him as ridiculous.

But I could see, as Jamie crossed to the stove, that the name meant nothing to him.

Chapter Sixteen

I'M OLD-FASHIONED, I'm afraid, in the matter of my affections. As I've said before, I'm essentially a one-man woman. I've never felt that a higher passion should parallel some higher peril, very much as the most appealing golf-courses fringe the sea-front. And all my eggs now seem committed to a single basket, roughly woven as that basket may stand. I could be satisfied with my granitic old Jamie. He may not sing under my window o' nights, but there's something solid and permanent about him, leaving him a sort of Wailing Wall against which a woman could cry out her heart, should the occasion arise.

So my talk with Hugh, the next morning when we were alone in the shack, was not altogether a happy one. It's a compliment, of course, to be informed, even obliquely, that a man is in love with you. It's about as substantial a compliment, all things considered, as the gods can throw into the lap of lonely womanhood. And there's a tinge of romance, I take it, in the thought that even one's first cousin could emulate Blondel of old and wander about the snowy wastes of the Great Northwest in search of the lady who had so abruptly vanished from his life. But the lady, in this case, was already shut up in a tower from which she had no wish to be rescued.

And as we sat over our empty coffee-cups, while the mounting sun began to melt the snow along the shack-eaves, I had to tell Hugh the truth about it all. I had to remind him that I had made my choice, that I was satisfied with it and that happiness hadn't altogether escaped me.

"But *are* you happy, Jo-Jo?" he asked as he happened to glance down at my hands so hardened and reddened by work. And I almost resented the look of pity that came into his eyes.

"Completely," I assured him, trying to keep an answering pity out of my own eyes as I studied his thin and restless face.

"You thought, once, that you were in love with Foraker," he reminded me.

"That's all over," I said. And I was able to say it with scarcely a twinge.

"And I'm afraid Foraker is too," announced Hugh. "He's been quite ill again. They're even sending him out to Biskra."

It came like news from another world, as remote as the little drums of China, as far-away as the rings of Saturn. And it seemed appropriate enough that Hugh, as he got up and walked to the window and back to the table again, should say while looking down at me: "Life's a strange mix-up, isn't it!"

I acknowledged that it was. But the thought, at the moment, that curled about my attention, rather like a kitten about a chair-leg, happened to be that love is

like cove-lighting, since you more often observe its effects than its cause.

"I suppose," Hugh was saying, "you don't want me around here?"

That hurt me a little. And it hurt me considerably more to see poor old Hughie so beaten and dispirited and unsure of himself. It brought me up out of my chair, confronting him.

"I love you, Hugh, as I'd love my own brother," I said with my hand on his shoulder. "And it will always be wonderful to know that you're somewhere near me. And if there's any way I can help you make a success of life, I'd like to do it."

"Well, everything's pretty well gone to smash with us," proclaimed the wanderer from across the sea. "I've even been talking to a neighbor of yours called Strickland. And starting next Monday I may be one of his hired men."

"But will that get you anywhere?" I demanded.

"No," answered Hugh with a shrug. "But it will keep me near you. And when you get tired of that I can go on to California."

"And what will you do in California?" I asked as I turned to put fresh coal on my dwindling range-fire.

"Old Wyndham went out there ten years ago and has a citrus grove down in the Imperial Valley. He's a bit arthritic and fed up on the hard work. And eventually, he tells me, he'd like to get back to Midhurst. So he's willing to take me in as a working partner if

"I'm willing to put two hundred pounds into the venture."

"But has it any promise of being a success?" I asked, not forgetful of certain New-World enterprises that hadn't panned out as they should.

"Wyndham says there's a decent living in it. And I'd rather like to have a shot at it—and living in a country where you can at least keep warm."

"But have you two hundred pounds?" I asked of Hugh as he moved closer to the stove.

"Almost," he answered with a smile, apparently, at my worldliness. "I'll have enough, at least, if I sell my books."

"But you love your books?" I reminded him.

"Well, a toiler in the fields won't miss them much," answered Hughie as he turned and studied my face. "And there's a thing or two, I fancy, you must have missed out here."

"Yes, there's a thing or two I've missed."

"Has it been worth it?" challenged Hugh with an abrupt hardening of his sensitive and none too happy face.

That gave me something to think over. But I refused to have my little card-house of happiness shaken down.

"Why do you ask that?" I inquired.

"Because you're too fine a woman, Jo-Jo," cried poor old deluded Hughie, "to waste what's left of your life on a man who doesn't deserve it."

"Perhaps he does," I suggested.

"Does he, Jo-Jo?" demanded Hugh, reaching out a hand and swinging me about so that he could look straight into my face.

That question, however, remained unanswered. For at precisely that moment Jamie himself walked in on us.

He stood very quiet, with his cavernous brown eyes resting first on me and then on Hugh, who dropped back from me and turned away to the shack window. And, as the silence prolonged between us, it struck me that we made up an odd triangle, in that lonely little prairie home with the dripping eaves, so far away from all the rest of the world.

I was the first to speak.

"Will you go away, please," I said to Hugh. "I want to talk to my husband."

Hugh hesitated, and I thought for a moment that he intended to stay. But after a second narrowing look at Jamie, who now seemed oblivious of his presence, he crossed to the wall-hook where his coat and cap hung, put them on and stepped out through the shack door.

"I'm almost glad this happened," I said when I was alone with my husband. For it was time, I knew, to sweep away those thin but maddening veils of deception.

But Jamie didn't answer me. He remained silent, for a tense moment or two, then turned back to me.

"How long have you known that man?" he asked. He spoke quietly, but it was with a quietness plainly coerced.

I was tempted, as I stared back at the unexpectedly hardened eyes staring into mine, to throw discretion to the wind and retort: "Twenty good years longer than I happen to have known you!" But I merely drew a deeper breath and said with wifely meekness: "Many, many years."

"And he's in love with you?" prompted Jamie, still speaking with the old grim quietness. But I noticed, with a small and womanish and altogether wayward surge of joy, that there was little color left in my husband's lean and misery-swept face.

"He likes me," I acknowledged with what must have been a pallid flicker of a smile. "But it's not what you seem to think."

"Then who is he?"

"He's my cousin," I patiently replied.

"That doesn't mean much," retorted Jamie, apparently at the end of his own patience.

"But we grew up together, almost," I explained as quietly as I was able. "He's—he's the nearest relative I have alive now. And he was always ready and willing, back in England, to help me when I most needed help. He knows I did a foolish thing, in coming out here the way I did, and he wanted to make sure I was happy."

"Then why didn't he come a little more honestly?"

"I don't think he knew," was my somewhat hesitating reply.

"Knew what?" demanded Jamie.

"I don't think he knew how—how happy I was with you," I said, still speaking as quietly as I could, and doing my best, at the same time, to keep the misery of my face from contradicting the words of my mouth. "It wasn't Hugh who was cowardly, last night. It was *me*. He was merely waiting on the side-lines, to see how much he was needed."

"And what's he going to do about it?" challenged Jamie, with the familiar old granite-boulder look on his face.

"He knows, now, there's nothing he can do," I said with what patience remained with me.

"Then what are *you* going to do?" demanded Jamie. And I began to feel a sense of unfairness sharpen into indignation, and indignation ripen into something dangerously close to anger. But I entrenched myself, in time, behind the final battlements of humility.

"I'm going to clear the board," I announced, "of the last shred of deception that stands between us. I may have been cowardly last night, just as I was cowardly last autumn, when I first came here. But I've had enough of all that. And now you're going to know the truth."

So I told Jamie what I should have told him before. I told him of my girlhood life in England, of my family and friends, of my work there, of Leslie, of my unhap-

piness, of my desperation, and of my determination, in coming out to him as I did, to keep life from falling to pieces under my feet. I told him, too, of my earlier belief that a woman could keep a closed mind, that she could surround herself, her inner self, by a shell of indifference, so that nothing could eventually hurt her, even though she did have to turn herself into a sort of cash-and-carry bride. But I had been wrong in that. For people can't, after all, insulate their souls. They can't go their own narrow way, without thinking of others, without being affected by others. And if they can't be at peace with the world around them, they can't be happy. For warfare, whether it's in muddy trenches or in our own muddled minds, is still the only game where both sides lose.

But what I was trying to say, apparently, wasn't proving of much immediate interest to my morose-eyed Jamie. He merely stood there studying my disgracefully tear-stained face, as though he still nursed the hope that some final answer to all his doubts might lie recorded in the neighborhood of my slightly reddened nose. Then he turned away, with that far-off horizon-rim look of his, as though he were staring clear through the walls of our little shack and studying something at a great distance.

"And after I saw you, Jamie," I went on with a thin but valorous effort at lightness, "*I did* want to keep you. That ought to be something worth remembering."

"There's something else worth remembering," the man of granite beside me finally said. "I mean that trust and deception don't usually mix."

"Of course they can't. That's why——"

But Jamie cut me short.

"That's why, if you've been fooled once," he amended, "you hate to think of it happening twice."

"But I'm being terribly honest with you, Jamie, right at this moment," I said as steadily as I could. "I'm almost throwing myself on your mercy. And I never pretended to be better than I was. I did almost the opposite."

"So I got more than I really bargained for," suggested Jamie. But I found myself flinching before that note of bitterness in his voice.

"No, Jamie, you didn't get what you deserved. And I had no right to drop those aitches. But I think you're big enough to understand, and make allowances. You've got to. For with me, now, you're the only thing that counts."

He stopped short in his polar-bear pacing up and down the room and caught me almost savagely by the wrist.

"Do you mean that?" he demanded.

"I'm your wife," I told him.

I felt, as I waited for him to speak, that destiny stood poised on one of life's Great Divides. But his face hardened as he turned away.

"That doesn't seem to mean much," he said as he

crossed to the shack window and stood staring out at the mottled gray and white waves of the open prairie.

"Then you're never going to believe in me?" I cried, fighting down an impulse to creep meekly after him.

But my question remained unanswered. For the diminuendo drone of a motor-car fell on my ears, followed by a quick splash of feet and the sound of a sharp knock on our shack door.

When Jamie refused to turn from the window, in response to that knock, I crossed to the door and opened it.

Bull McDoel stood there, oppressively hale and hearty-looking in his double-breasted raglan slightly spattered with trail-mud. He carried with him, when he stepped into our meagerly furnished living-room, an aroma of cigar-smoke and opulence. And his eye, as he glanced at me, was an uncomfortably possessive one.

"Well, have we made up our minds yet?" he asked in a voice that was both bantering and cheery.

"Almost," I said with a small shiver of desperation.

"Good," proclaimed McDoel as his glance wandered on to my husband.

But Jamie refused to turn from his window.

"Must you know to-day?" I asked, remembering how all my future teetered in the balance.

McDoel's eye, for all his heaviness, went quickly from Jamie to me and back to Jamie again.

"A good thing's always worth waiting for," he quietly affirmed.

"That," I said with answering quietness, "is why I've got to ask for a little more time."

He stood silent a moment. Then, with the ghost of a shrug, he glanced at my husband's back.

"It's up to you, lady," he said as he turned and crossed solemnly to the door.

And it wasn't until the sound of his car died away that Jamie wheeled and confronted me.

"You're not going to McDoel's," he said with unexpected harshness.

"What will stop me?" I asked.

"I will," proclaimed Jamie. "You're still my wife, remember. And I'm going to be pretty primitive about that fact. You're coming with me."

"Where?" I asked.

"Across the Line," cried Jamie.

"When?" was my next question.

"As soon as you can get ready. We'll go in the car. And we'll get out of here before the roads break up."

"Is that the only reason?" I asked.

"Then before this family breaks up," cried Jamie with a ring of iron in his voice.

"Is it a family?" And that question of mine carried a sharper note of bitterness than I had intended.

"There's an outsider or two trying to keep it from being one," averred Jamie. "And we may as well move on to where we can live in peace."

I could feel a stab of pain mixed with pity as I stared into his wearied and frustrate face.

"But living in peace, as you phrase it, isn't just a matter of geography. It's something that depends on our own souls. And I'd be afraid for you, Jamie, once you'd given up this land of yours."

"There may be something else I don't care to give up."

"But you've your work here," I contended. "And that ought to come first."

Jamie turned and studied my face. Then he stared out at the sodden snow-drifts that still lay along his fence-lines.

"Wouldn't you rather live in a country where they've got climate instead of just weather?" he asked with defensive flippancy.

"What's the matter with this country?" I demanded.

"Nothing, if you're an Eskimo," retorted Jamie.

"But you've been happy here. Happy in your work, I mean."

"Well, that seems to be over now," was his harsh retort. "And there's no way we can keep this ranch."

My gaze rested on the plaque that held the two stately strands of wheat-stalks, the grain that had once been the pride of a province.

"Then let's make one," I cried, squaring my shoulders.

"I've tried that," said Jamie. "But it's no use."

"Then it's my turn," I proclaimed. And if a never-

say-die intensity in my voice brought a half-pitying smile to Jamie's face, I disregarded it. "You asked, not long ago, to have things left in your hands. Now I'm asking to have them left in mine."

"What can you do?" he listlessly inquired.

"I don't know, just yet. But I'd like to prove that you come first with me. I'd like to show that you can depend on me. I may have started wrong. But I don't want to end up that way."

Jamie backed off a little as I held out my hand.

"Let's stick," I said. "And stick together."

It was, in a way, almost a challenge. But bewildered as was the light in his eye, my husband, after a moment of hesitation, solemnly shook hands with me.

Chapter Seventeen

It's odd how, sometimes, we fail to see the forest for the trees. And it's equally odd how you can live with a man and know so little of his inner life, how you can be side by side with him and yet remain a stranger to so many of his secret hopes and aims and feelings. I'd often felt vaguely annoyed at my Jamie's none too Chesterfieldian habit of chewing wheat-kernels. I'd even questioned him about it one day, asking if he thus emulated the beasts of the field because he was so badly fed at home. But Jamie merely laughed at me.

"That, Lady Sparrow, is the last test of the wheat berry," he explained to me. "It's how we test the gluten in our grain. The better the sponge it makes between your jaws the higher it ranks as a milling sample. And my first equipment as a seed-grower seems to have been a good set of teeth."

Jamie, at another time, had proclaimed that the only white man's job he knew of was growing wheat. He'd even claimed that there was something epic about it.

"I love to see grain growing on this open prairie of ours," he'd solemnly asserted. "I like to see it come up out of the soil and turn the brown to green, and grow tall enough to ripple in the wind, and turn yellow and

gold, and stand in clean-rowed stooks like an army a mile long. It's great to see that grain flowing out of a thresher-spout, and going up into the elevators, and then moving in long train-loads toward the markets of the world. It makes you remember that you're mixed up in a game that's worth something."

But I never quite understood what wheat meant to my husband until, a few days ago, a shrewd-eyed stranger with pointed ears like a fox drove up to our door and had a talk with Jamie.

Our visitor, who called himself Crummer and disregarded me as entirely as though I were not even on earth, explained himself as a seed-expert and announced that he'd heard Jamie had grown some exceptional wheat. He was anxious to look over our seed samples, and, as he expressed it, "talk business."

Jamie, with a dourness which I accepted as largely defensive, took a bottle of seed-wheat from his desktop and carefully counted out a dozen kernels, which he spread on a sheet of writing-paper. Then he sat back, grim-eyed, while the stranger looked them over, examined them under a pocket microscope, weighed them in the hollow of his hand, reexamined them, and finally put them in his flaccid-lipped mouth, where he slowly and thoughtfully chewed them to a glutenous pulp, exactly as I'd so often seen Jamie himself grind up a half-handful of grains between his big white molars.

"How much have you got of this?" asked Crummer

as he took the gluten from his mouth and rather disgustingly tested its sponginess between his fingers.

"About fifteen bushels," admitted Jamie.

"Is it all like this?" questioned the other as he took up the bottle and once more squinted over its contents.

"Exactly like that," acknowledged Jamie.

"How about five dollars a bushel for it?" asked the stranger.

But Jamie, incredibly listless, merely shook his head from side to side.

"How about ten dollars a bushel?"

And still Jamie, for reasons entirely foreign to me, evinced no enthusiasm.

"At the elevator," Crummer reminded him, "you're in luck when you get fifty-two cents a bushel."

"Not for wheat like this," retorted Jamie.

"Then what's your price?" exacted our caller. "How about twelve a bushel?"

"I'm not sure that I want to sell yet," was Jamie's indifferent-noted reply. "That wheat, remember, carried off first prize at Calgary. And if I'd been able to enter it at Chicago it would have done the same thing there."

Our visitor's laugh held a touch of scorn.

"I s'pose you know that means the best wheat in the world?"

"That's exactly what I mean," averred Jamie as he closed his desk.

"You're pretty sure of your stuff," proclaimed Crummer, getting up from his chair. For the valedictory nature of Jamie's movement was not to be doubted.

"I ought to be," said my husband. "I spent considerable time creating it."

"And you don't intend to sell?"

"Not yet," announced Jamie, also rising.

The two men, as they stood there silently facing each other in the shadowy room, made me think of two embattled cockerels in a fowl-run.

"Well, when you're willing to listen to reason," said the stranger as he buttoned up his greatcoat, "let me know."

And he went out without so much as a "Good-day to you" to the lady of the house.

Yet Jamie knew, when we were alone again, that I was studying him with a somewhat perplexed eye. I was even conscious of a vague antagonism in his glance as he crossed to the Barracks and inspected the nine precious bags of seed against the wall there. But by the time he had replaced the tarpaulin over the bag-pile I had ventured into the realm of higher mathematics. And twelve times fifteen, I figured, amounted to one hundred and eighty. And two days before we had traded in our radio-set for a copper-bottomed wash-boiler.

"Why wouldn't you sell that wheat?" I asked Jamie as he came back to our scantily furnished living-room.

He smiled rather wintrily as he sat down in his home-made armchair and reached for his pipe and filled it.

"Because," he said with an unexpected note of passion in his voice, "*that's the best wheat ever grown on God's green earth!*"

It didn't sound like Jamie. He was not in the habit of overestimating his own belongings and his own accomplishments.

"Who says so?" I asked as I masked my bewilderment by putting fresh coal in the range.

"I say so," announced Jamie, unexpectedly sure of his ground. "And I ought to know, for I worked eleven years to make it what it is."

I took up my darning-basket and wool, but before starting to weave a new heel on a sadly apocalyptic sock, waited until Jamie swung back to his desk and poured a handful of his seed-wheat out on a crockery saucer, turning the kernels over and over with his long and bony finger.

"How do you mean you made it what it is?" I asked, puzzled by the pride with which he inspected those plump and uniform berries of golden red that were neither altogether red nor altogether gold.

"What do you know about wheat?" he countered as I threaded my darning-needle.

"Very little," I acknowledged, "except that it's the staff of life and it's mentioned in the Bible, and must be very old."

"It's older than that," proclaimed Jamie. "It's even

older than recorded history. It's been found in tombs that were sealed up over six thousand years ago. And some Neolithic man somewhere in western Asia must have harvested the first crop of it about fifteen thousand years before you and I were born. He stumbled on a desert grass-seed that was good for grinding and making into bread. The ancient Chinese had it, remember, and also the Egyptians."

"Yes, I happen to have heard of Joseph," I admitted. "And also of mummy wheat."

But Jamie seemed a trifle annoyed at my ignorance.

"That's all piffle," he retorted, "if you mean the so-called mummy wheat that fakers peddle around for seeding. For every agronomist knows that the embryo shrivels up and the proteins decompose and a wheat-berry twelve years old has lost its germinating power." Jamie, as he looked up at me, made me think of Leslie talking literature. "Do you happen to know anything about Darwin? About selection and cross-fertilization?"

"I naturally know a little," I retorted, a trifle resentful of the pedagogic note in my companion's voice.

"Well, about the only wheat that was grown in the West here fifty years ago," went on my unruffled instructor in grain history, "was Red and White Fife, which came to Canada from Galicia by way of Scotland. It wasn't a bad wheat. But it ripened too slowly for this northerly climate. And the farther north you grow wheat, remember, the better your wheat is in

milling quality. So they tried to breed a wheat-berry that would mature quicker. They got dozens and dozens of different strains, but early in the century Saunders evolved what's called Marquis wheat. He got it by crossing Red Fife with an East-Indian wheat known as Hard Red Calcutta. And Marquis, to-day, is the beardless red king of the North. Later on, though, we got Garnett, which has taken from six to twelve days off the ripening period of Marquis."

"Are a few days so important?" I asked out of my agronomic blindness.

"Time is everything," explained Jamie. "Why, they used to say wheat could never be grown in the Peace River country. That's only six hundred miles north of the Line. The season, they claimed, was too short. In that valley, to-day, they're growing millions of bushels. And every day that is taken from a wheat-strain's ripening period adds just so many million acres to man's bread-producing territory. So if I can produce a wheat that ripens three or four days earlier than other strains, I'm practically handing over to a hungry world thirty or forty million acres of new land. I bring that into the bread-producing area—and there's plenty of it waiting for us up there under the Arctic Circle. But get this point too: if I can so improve my strain, if I can make my heads heavier without lowering the milling quality, so as to add just one single bushel an acre to this country's crop, I'm making it richer by more than fifteen million dollars a year."

If I sensed the drama of the thing, I sensed it only vaguely. It failed to move me, I'm afraid, as it moved my Jamie, who sat with a luminous glow in his abstracted brown eye.

"But where do you come in?" I asked him. For women, after all, are the realists of this world. They nurse a homely craving for a roof over their heads, for security and orderly lives and some promise for the future.

So Jamie, with a forbearing sort of patience, explained to me where he came in. Even before he went to Ames, to study agriculture down in Iowa, he had dabbled a little in wheat-breeding. While still in his teens he'd fenced off a plot on the home-farm and made clumsy and none too successful efforts to cross-breed selected varieties of seed. But at Ames he'd learned how to do it intelligently, how to separate the covering chaff from the tiny and immature wheat-flowers, which, if left alone, would fertilize themselves; how with a pair of small forceps to remove the anthers; how, at the exact time the glumes relax, to fertilize the exposed ovary with pollen selected from the matured flower of another variety, by brushing the anther of such a flower gently over the waiting pistil; how to close the flower-case again to protect it from any foreign pollen the wind might bring to it; how to tag it and tie it to a cane of bamboo to support it until harvest-time; how to reseed and keep a careful record of each kernel until the strain seemed fixed; and how, eventually, by

selecting and propagating the cream of each season's product, to obtain a wheat-berry that stood out from its brothers. "That stood out," explained Jamie, "about the same as a pedigreed and pure-blooded Ayrshire stands out from the inbred scrub-stock of a jerk-water rancher."

His first experiments, he went on to say, were with a Himalayan wheat originally grown almost eleven thousand feet above sea-level. He finally succeeded in crossing this with some Russian seed from Riga, grown in the Lake Ladago district, which meant a good six hundred miles nearer the North Pole than Winnipeg. This blend was surprisingly quick to ripen. But the flour from it was yellowish. And the world demands white flour. So Jamie set about to breed for color. He fought to get rid of that yellow streak. Then he worked for fuller heads and heavier kernels, for though his new blend was especially hard and had the required flour-strength, which means its ability to take up water when mixed to a dough, its yield per acre promised to be disappointingly small.

But life is short and agriculture, apparently, is long. Ames and Iowa were left behind, and Jamie came to Canada, looking for the land he wanted. He found it in the Elk Crossing district. But for several years he had to mark time, teaching school in winter and working with the threshing-gangs in summer, before he could come into possession of his land. Yet even while he was busy teaching the children of more opulent

wheat-growers he maintained a trial half-acre of prairie loam and kept up his cross-fertilization experiments, all the while slowly working toward one definite end. People called him a crank. And he had his setbacks, as all men do. One year cattle broke into his seed-lot and destroyed nine-tenths of his trial crop. Another time hail hit him. And, the first summer on his own ranch, his crop rusted and left him with merely a handful of usable seed.

But that, Jamie explained, turned his attention to the question of rust, the one unconquered enemy of the modern wheat-grower. It's a fungoid disease that arrests the growth, dries up the stalk and causes the ripening kernels to shrivel. Dominion forestry fliers, Jamie told me, have found its spores floating in the air ten thousand feet above the ground. And cultures of black-stem rust spores have been taken from air-currents, over Minnesota, three miles from the earth. It's mostly during moist warm weather that this parasite thrives on the leaves and stem of the wheat-plant. But the damage is done when it penetrates the epidermis of the plant and prevents the passage of the sugar to the grains, the sugar that should later become starch.

So Jamie diverted his line of advance and moved toward a new objective, a cross-breed that would be rust-resisting. But this was beyond him. Seasonal conditions made experimenting too uncertain and final testing too prolonged. And he wasn't equipped for the laboratory-work required. Yet once, he said, he

thought he had an immune plant. But his hopes crumbled when, just above the nodes, he found the telltale small pustules. Complete immunization wasn't there, although the actual rust-damage was negligible. Instead of giving up, however, he went at the problem from another angle. By going back to his earlier plan, and working toward a quickly maturing blend, he told himself, he might effect a victory of time and get a wheat that would ripen before the rust peril would become acute. So he swung back to his earliest ambition, the heaviest head of the hardest white-flour wheat that could be harvested in the shortest possible time.

He seeded and watched and reseeded and selected and seeded still again. And then the key to success was thrust in his hand. As Jamie modestly admitted, it may have been accident, or it may have been answer to prayer, but there, at last, the patient prairie toiler found two spikes of grain that lived up to all his earlier hopes. That was four years ago. They were regal and giant-like heads, packed with close-glumed and full-bodied kernels, kernels as beautiful to the eye, at least to the eye that understood them, as any handful of Oriental pearls. It was like striking gold, after sullen years of struggle. For from one head was counted out a hundred and twelve perfect kernels. The other held exactly one hundred and nine.

"That was the actual beginning of my wheat," proclaimed Jamie as he sat in front of me letting the full-bodied berries, that looked so oddly seminal, run

through his fingers, not unlike a miser, I thought, quietly exulting in the feel of so many golden sovereigns. "Those two hundred and ten kernels—I had the bad luck to lose a few of them—were worth more than everything else I'd grown. I could hold them in my hand. And when I held them that way, knowing what I did, I rather had the feeling that I was holding the whole world there. It made me a little drunk."

"But that was only a handful," I frowningly reminded him.

"Considerably under a pound," acknowledged Jamie. "But I sowed as much as I considered safe, lost over half my plot through hail, and still saved nearly half a bushel. Then my half-bushel went back in the soil. I was too eager for results, I suppose, and sowed too early, drilling into the surface-mud when there was still a foot of frost in the ground. But I got back nearly sixteen bushels."

"As good as the rest?" I somewhat tremulously questioned.

"Over fifteen bushels of the finest wheat that human hands ever harvested," proclaimed my rapt-eyed Jamie. "And I still have it. It's in those bags you regard as such a nuisance around the Barracks."

I sat silent for a moment or two, for I was thinking of other things. I was remembering, as I looked at Jamie's lean brown face, how much he had missed out of life. His days had been lonely and hard. He'd had no games and diversions, no light-hearted talk in fire-

lit libraries at the tea-hour. He'd lived without the consolations of art and music. He'd known little companionship. He'd witnessed little of that richer pagantry of existence which rolls by under the eyes of men who live and have their being in the great centers of the world. He'd never seen London in Coronation Week or watched Scotland play England at Twickenham or floated along the Thames on an Oxford and Kingston steamer or walked the Gardens of the Luxembourg when the horse-chestnuts were breaking into bloom or wandered through Rome in Easter-Week.

Yet his life hadn't been an entirely empty one. It had been austere rich with one grim and unwavering purpose. He had justified himself by creating something. He had lived humbly, and close to the soil, but from that soil he had wrested something that would leave the world the better for his having lived. And to this soil that had given him his one taste of glory, I told myself with a little tingle of exaltation, he still had a debt to discharge.

"It would take a year or two, of course," Jamie was saying, "to establish the genetic purity of this strain of mine, to show that it can perpetuate itself and at the same time behave itself. But that doesn't bother me. The breed is there. And it's a royal breed. Release the lion and he will defend himself."

Yet I underwent, as I caught the quaver of intensity in his voice, an abrupt change of mood. Through me went an odd and foolish pang of jealousy. I was, after

all, merely an attendant in the temple of agronomy. This wheat of Jamie's was the one passion of his life, the thing that came before everything else. Even the love of woman would take a second place in the thoughts of such a man.

"But your prize," I wilfully reminded him, "was only a provincial one."

"Yet it means something," announced Jamie, "to be best in Alberta. The final judging of such things, of course, takes place in the grain division of the International Live Stock Exposition at Chicago every year. The wheat that wins there is acknowledged the best wheat in the world. And during the last twenty-one years, remember, this northwest prairie-land of ours has seventeen times carried off the first prize."

"Then why," I asked as I looked into Jamie's lean face, "are you willing to give up land that means so much to you?"

Jamie's laugh was a wintry one.

"Because I haven't much choice in the matter."

"You mean," I questioned, "that there's no longer any money in growing wheat?"

"No, I don't mean that," retorted Jamie. "The world may seem overstocked, at the moment, but people will always have to have bread. There's enough hunger in the world, right at this moment, to make you realize that the trouble is mostly in distribution. And the chemists are just getting interested in wheat, as they did with cotton. From cotton they got cellulose and

then cellophane and rayon and films and explosives. And wheat, some day, will add still more than that to industry. But even now man's demand for white bread is a register of his civilization. There's Russia, of course. She's organizing to dump cheap grain on the world. But people who're still half-animal can't expect to grow grain like ours. You can't mechanize a serf-race in a single generation. And we'll soon get the trick of meeting any Slav price in the world-markets."

"But you've said there's no profit in growing wheat," I reminded him.

"That's only temporary," contented Jamie, "and the answer to Russia's challenge is right here in this bottle. It's quality that counts with wheat, the same as with anything else. A seed-grain like this, with over a hundred kernels to the head, will give a yield per acre that could turn a harvest loss into a profit."

Jamie said it quietly enough. But I felt a thrill of bigness in those casually uttered words.

"Then why," I asked, "should we funk it?"

Jamie's frown, as his gaze met mine, attested to the fact that he hadn't quite understood me.

"Oh, Jamie," I cried with a little quiver of emotion spider-legging up and down my spine, "why should we even think of giving up when we've gone this far? Why can't we knuckle down and stick to this ranch that's shown it can grow the best wheat in the world? Why can't we show 'em we're not quitters?"

"The only answer to that," said Jamie as he put

down his wheat-bottle, "is eight hundred dollars. Eight hundred dollars in cash. We simply haven't got that much, and we've no means of getting it."

I probed about for possibilities, rather frantically and foolishly.

"Perhaps Hugh could help us," I ventured.

"No, thank you," Jamie retorted with significant enough abruptness.

"I've a few old family trinkets I could sell," was my next thin-noted suggestion.

"I wouldn't ask that of you," answered Jamie, as determinedly as before.

"Then why couldn't I teach school?" I persisted. "Somebody said that Bolton Creek teacher was being sent back to Ontario after Easter. Why couldn't I fit in there?"

Jamie, leaning back, looked at me with an abstracted sort of hungriness that was new to him.

"How much would I see of you," he asked, "if that ever happened?"

And that, I felt, was going pretty far for my reticent old Jamie.

"But I know how to teach children," I contended. "And that might give us our start."

"Then who'd run this house?" demanded Jamie.

"Suppose we got some cheap help," I suggested.

"Perhaps we could get Indian Nellie back."

"Only over my dead body," said Jamie with decision.

"I wish," I said in my helplessness, "McDoel wasn't such an impossible brute."

But Jamie's mind, I realized as he crossed to the window, was on other things.

"I wish we *could* work out some way of sticking to this old ranch," he said as he looked out over his rolling acres.

I watched him for a moment of silence. Then my glance fell to the little cluster of prize-wheat kernels on the desk-top.

"I'm going to find one," I abruptly proclaimed.

And it wasn't until I saw Jamie smiling down at my foolishly clenched fists that I realized the note of passion I'd crowded into that ultimatum, the second one, I remembered, that I had issued in a single week.

Chapter Eighteen

EVEN a she-badger, I'm told, will fight for its mate. And I've forgotten a little of my timidity in fighting for my Jamie.

When he was away at Elk Crossing, in response to a none too tranquilizing summons from the local bank manager, I put my pride in my pocket and a saddle on Buckshot and rode over to McPherson's Corners, where I talked with the dour Scotch head of the School Board. Then I circled about to the Strickland ranch, where Hugh was making his temporary quarters. And as Hughie and I sat out in the flat March sunlight, between a corral and a pen of squealing porkers, I told him, out of a clear sky, that we had to have eight hundred dollars or lose our home. And Hugh didn't fail me.

"That's simple enough," he said with his English matter-of-factness. "When do you want it?"

"But it's not," I explained, "as simple as it seems. Jamie's rather stiff-necked about borrowing."

Hughie's glance, for all its kindness, was an understanding one.

"You don't think he would take it if he knew I happened to be the lender?"

"It's simply, Hughie, that he doesn't understand you yet," I protested.

"In that case," he casually suggested, "it had better come as a London draft, from your family. And I'm still part of the family, remember."

"But I hate to do 'it, Hughie," I half-heartedly demurred.

"It'll be waiting for you at your Elk Crossing bank next week," announced Hugh as his uncomfortably searching eye looked deep into mine. And I wasn't as happy as I might have been. My fond and foolish female-of-the-species cry to Hugh that I merely wanted to save Jamie from himself didn't seem to cover the case as it ought. Yet a friend, I remembered, was some one who knows all our faults and still cares for us in spite of our virtues. And Hughie understood me, perhaps, even better than I understood myself.

"But what will become of the orange-grove?" I demurred as he stood rather hungrily studying my face.

"That can wait a year," he said with valorously pretended carelessness.

"And what will you do," I questioned, "while it's waiting? I hate to think of you doing farm work."

"Frankly," admitted Hugh, "I don't think I could. At least, not happily or successfully. And I don't even think I can stick it out with the Stricklands here much longer."

"Of course you couldn't," I agreed.

"I'm afraid I'm what they call a white-collar man," he dolorously proclaimed.

"You're true blue, Hughie, no matter what color the

collar," I protested, with one hand on his arm. And then a thought occurred to me. "How would you like to take over the Bolton Creek school and come and live with us?"

"And teach?" asked the startled Hughie.

"Yes," I explained, "teach the three R's to two dozen little wheat-rustlers."

"I tutored for a while, at home," acknowledged Hugh. "And I rather hated it."

"But these little beggars are so in need of what you could give them," I pointed out. "They're so eager to learn, so responsive and receptive. And there's something rather noble, Hughie, in handing out what these little prairie waifs are hungering for."

"But would they want me?" asked Hugh, after a moment of thought.

"Our hope, Hughie, lies in a humble cigarette. That foolish woman smoked in her classroom and they're firing her. And you're a graduate of Oxford. And teachers aren't easy to get out here."

"But would you or your husband," asked Hughie, "want me?"

"I'd love to have you, Hughie," was my truthful enough reply. "We'd all be less lonely then. And Jamie, I know, would eventually see things as I do. He'd get to like you. His one hope of not being a failure in life is to keep that land of his. And one crop could put him on his feet again."

I tried to console myself with the thought that Hugh

was not an American. He was not, like the typical son of the New World, hell-bent on success. He had an Old-World philosophy of life which inured him to failure, or, rather, to what the unthinking so often accepted as failure.

"I'm in your hands, Jo-Jo," he said with his quiet and wistful smile. "But I must pay my board, of course."

"All right," I said, knowing the matter was settled.

But I wasn't as happy over that victory as I might have been. It seemed to come at a price which I wasn't quite willing to put into words. And there were still difficulties to overcome. One of these, I felt, was the right mood and moment for taking it up with Jamie, who, morose and self-innured, had spent much of the last day or two at his desk.

But my hesitations were unexpectedly ended by the appearance of Bull McDoel, who alighted from his big and glittering motor-car at the end of a raw and windy March afternoon, to look over, I later discovered, what remained of Jamie's implements and stock. For his interest in Journey's End, apparently, remained a fixed one.

Through my window, as I worked, I could see the two men conferring and arguing, each with his own suggestion of combativeness, though one made me think of a plump and well-fed bulldog and the other of a gaunt and hungry mastiff. And more than ever I resented McDoel's expression as he walked coolly

into my home and glanced appraisingly about. Even his bow, when he stepped aside as I carried my bread-board in from the kitchen, was one of mock humility. But his eye, I noticed, was intent on my face.

"I was sorry to get that message of yours," he said with a blunt sort of friendliness. "But I'm not giving up hope."

"Neither are we," I said with the ghost of a smile. And that held him for a moment.

"Things could have been made considerably easier for you," he averred as his disapproving glance rested on my patched gingham waist.

"It's nice to know," I admitted, "that others are so willing to help."

"You'll need that help," he proclaimed, "a little sooner than you imagine."

"What's going to happen?" I asked, refusing to part with my note of blitheness.

"Among other things, I may take over this place of yours," he said with one of his heavy and uncalled-for laughs. Then, lifting a semaphoric eyebrow at my silence, he turned to where my husband stood in the doorway.

"By the way, Gilson," he casually inquired, "I take it you've kept that prize wheat of yours?"

"I have," was Jamie's curt retort.

"What are you asking for it?" questioned our visitor.

"I'm not selling that wheat," was Jamie's dogged reply.

And again McDoel's semaphoric eyebrow went up.

"D' you intend carrying it around with you on your wanderings?" he asked, not without a touch of malice, I thought.

"If it's going to be carried," answered my husband, "I guess I'll do the carrying."

"But what's the use of seed-wheat, if you haven't the land to sow it on?" demanded the blank-eyed McDoel.

"Well, it's not going to other people's land," announced Jamie. "I've never even let the Experimental Farms fool with it. So I'm not likely to leave it in the care of a cattle-breeder."

Our visitor merely shrugged.

"Might I ask where you're going from here?" he said as he blinked up at the room-walls where I'd tacked a few of my English prints.

"I've been thinking of going back to the States," was Jamie's unexpected admission.

"And taking her?" pursued the cattle-king, with a somewhat uncouth thumb-jerk in my direction.

"Of course," proclaimed Jamie.

"Wasn't she born in England?" demanded McDoel.

"What about it?" challenged my husband.

"I was wondering," pursued our cool-eyed caller, "just how you'd get her across the Line, without waiting a year and a half for the quota?"

Jamie's eyes hardened.

"I guess there are ways enough," he announced.

"Not unless she's willing to take the chance of six months in a federal jail," McDoel reminded him, with another of his curt laughs as he picked up his gauntlets and drew them on.

"I'd rather see her there than under your roof," cried Jamie, with altogether unlooked-for passion.

"It might be less like jail than this," retorted McDoel. And having delivered that bolt he turned and strode out to his car.

Jamie, when we were alone, stood and studied me with a haggard eye.

"Is this like jail?" he somewhat tremulously demanded.

"No, Jamie, it isn't," I promptly proclaimed. "And we're not going to the States."

My husband crossed to a chair and sat down in it. Then he reached for his pipe and his pouch, shaking his last few crumbs of tobacco into the palm of a bony hand that wasn't so steady as it should be.

"Perhaps we're not," he listlessly admitted. "But what're we going to do?"

"We're going to stay right here on this ranch," I announced. "And we're going to grow the best crop of wheat ever grown in all Alberta."

Jamie, at what must have been an unfamiliar ring in my voice, smiled one of his thin and frosted smiles.

"And just how are we going to do that?" he inquired.

"Because," I told him, "I'm taking a hand in this situation. I've had to. Up to now, I know, I haven't

helped much. No, don't interrupt me. But from now on it's going to be different. For I've just borrowed a hundred and sixty pounds from my family. That's almost eight hundred dollars. And in a few days it will be waiting for us in that Elk Crossing bank."

"But——"

I cut Jamie's protest short.

"No, there'll be no buts," I proclaimed. "For I'm working this out in my own way. And there's another phase of it you'll simply have to accept. My cousin Hugh can get the job of teaching over at the Bolton Creek school, substituting on a special permit for that abandoned woman who smoked cigarettes in her classroom. If he does that we can get ten dollars a week by taking him in to board with us. And when school closes we'll have him to help with the harvest. And——"

"But I don't want a stranger in this home of ours," said the granite-jawed man confronting me.

"Hugh isn't a stranger," I contended. "He's a scholar and a gentleman, and the more you know him the more you'll realize he's one of the kindest and fairest-minded men who ever tried to make other people happy. Once you get over this prejudice——"

"Then he's not like me," interrupted my self-immured husband.

"No, he's not like you, Jamie," I was honest enough to admit. "You're stronger and bigger than he is, You're strong and big and rather ruthless. And for

all that, whether I'm foolish or not, I can't help admiring you. You have one single end in view and you won't be happy until you reach it. And I want to see you a success."

Jamie, instead of answering me, got up from his chair and crossed to the window. He stood staring up at a gray-streaked sky, across which I could see a phalanx of wild geese, flying north, honking resolutely as they flew.

Jamie also saw them, for he stood there, blinking abstractedly after them. Then he turned abruptly about to me.

"Do you want this man here?" he asked abruptly inquired.

"As I said before, I want to see you a success. And this seems the only way open."

Jamie turned away and then looked irresolutely back at me.

"He's—he's not going to come between us?" he rather foolishly and pathetically inquired.

"Nothing could come between us," I replied, "if we only keep close enough together. We're using Hugh Wentringer. And, in one way, I'm almost ashamed of it. But you still happen to come first."

Jamie turned rather wearily to the shack window, where he stood watching a second V of geese heading into the cloudy North.

"That means spring again," he said, as much to himself as to me.

I went to the window and stood beside him.

"It means more than spring," I said. "It means hope and hard work and going back to the battle instead of beating a retreat. It means it's time to get out on that land of ours again."

Jamie looked down at me, with a relieving pucker of something that was dangerously close to amusement on his lean and brown-skinned cheek.

"You're quite a fighter, aren't you?" he half-mockingly observed. But there was no trace of malice in his smile. And I knew that I hadn't lost my first battle.

Chapter Nineteen

AN ODD change, during the last two weeks, has taken place in the Gilson family. We are no longer singing in the tumbrel and whistling to get past the graveyard. For we are not, after all, to be drifters, or "movers," as they are somewhat contemptuously known out here in the great open spaces. We are going to stick to our land. And we still have a roof over our heads.

It's with Jamie, I think, that the greatest change has taken place. A new and rather grim spirit of hope has got possession of him, mixed up with an equally grim passion for work which rather takes my breath away. His notes have been renewed, his tractor and binder have been returned to him, and now that the frost will soon be getting out of the ground he is swinging back into the familiar old fight of the northern wheat-farmer against Time. He sets his alarm-clock for a quarter to four, goes out to the stable by lantern-light, scurries through his chores, dodges in for the hot breakfast I have awaiting him, and is out on his land again long before the morning sun has peeked up over the eastern prairie-rim. He comes in at noon, hurries abstractedly through his dinner, and once more disappears in the midst of his muddy acres. At night-fall he comes back to me, sweat-stained and dog-tired and covered with mud, plods through his farmyard

duties, absently admires my new-hatched chicks, and morosely proceeds to wash up for supper.

"It seems to be a case of reciprocity," I observed the other night when I was helping Jamie to get rid of the encasing mud.

"What is?" he asked as he reached for a hand-towel made from a wheat-sack.

"Your sticking to your land, Jamie," I explained, "for it certainly sticks to you."

"It's the early bird, in crop work, that catches the worm," he said as he rolled down his patched and faded shirt-sleeves.

But even the day-end brings no rest. For Jamie, by lantern-light, is building a lean-to on this shack of ours, an extra bedroom for Hugh, who has not been overly comfortable bunking in one corner of our littered-up Barracks. Not that Hugh ever complains. He is busy enough himself, for his school-work is new to him and evening by evening he has to pioneer laboriously ahead of his classes, patiently instructing himself before being able to instruct his back-township pupils. But it's more interesting, he claims, than he expected. And he still finds time to help me about the house, carrying in coal and water, feeding the pigs and contentedly lugging skim-milk out to the hungry calves and even learning the abstruse art of cleaning out a horse-stable. Yet the other day when he heard me say that I intended to learn to milk, in order to take a little of the load off my Jamie's shoulders, the

customarily quiet-eyed Hugh quickly and vehemently objected.

"That's not a woman's work," he proclaimed. "At least, not for a woman of your class."

"Why, Hughie, I'm a farmer's wife," I reminded him.

"But you weren't brought up to do farmyard labor," contended Hugh.

"I'd feel less useless," I announced, "if I had been."

"Going out and milking manure-covered cows," argued Hugh, "isn't a woman's work. And I'm not going to see you do it."

"Then who'll do it?" I asked.

"I will," he solemnly proclaimed.

So next Sunday, when he can spare the time, Jamie is going to give a certain Oxford graduate his first lessons in milking. But Hughie's initial pailful of milk, I'm afraid, won't come from overly contented cows.

I hate to think that toil is hardening us. And even nature, I notice, comes unexpectedly to our relief. Three days ago, for instance, clearing skies brought an open night of hard frost, leaving the ground frozen so deep that Jamie had to abandon the thought of work on it. So we took advantage of that enforced holiday to motor in to Elk Crossing, since Jamie needed some machine parts and I had a dozen and one things to get for Hugh's new room.

It was a blithe and lovely morning, for all the cold, with a filmy cloud-arch of old-point lace bridging the

high-reaching dome of heaven and Pavlova justifying her name as she jigged and danced along the frozen-rutted trail. And I felt absurdly happy to be sitting there side by side with Jamie. Being more pagan than my Puritan-minded husband, I even burst into song as we sped along. I surrendered to sheer animal spirits and began to warble abandonedly as we went dipping along wide waves of umber-colored farmlands. Then, for no earthly reason, I leaned against Jamie's shoulder and laughed aloud.

"Let's sing together," I blithely suggested.

But Jamie merely swept me with a questioning side-glance.

"That's not one of my accomplishments," he dourly proclaimed.

"But surely you've had the impulse?" I demanded, refusing to be shadowed by his solemnity.

"I've learned to control my impulses," he announced as he sat a trifle straighter in the car-seat. And my slightly embittered laugh seemed to perplex him.

"But that's bad for you, Jamie," I said with a levity that was only skin-deep. "All those repressions and inhibitions might some day sour your soul and give you a warped view of life. And then what would you do?"

"I'd do about what I'm doing now," was Jamie's morose and none too satisfactory reply.

"Then how about me?" I demanded. "For it's spring, and I'm alone with the sharer of my joys and sorrows, and a little tired of repressions."

"It would be very pleasant to hear you sing," said Jamie with protective politeness.

I looked at him for a moment, wondering if pride was to face the fatal toll of ten. But I refused to take the count. And as we sped along I began to sing again, quietly and determinedly. I sang *Loch Lomond* and *Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt*, and when those melancholy ballads brought no response from Jamie's solemn covenanter's soul I wilfully and provocatively sang *Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms*, and had the satisfaction of seeing my life-partner's face begin to work a little. It was only when I thoughtlessly slipped into *It's A Long, Long Way to Tipperary* that the joy suddenly went out of the occasion. For that sadly blithe old war-air took my thoughts back to England, back to my girlhood, to columns of marching men who went off across the Channel and never came back, to the rainy afternoon I watched Leslie entrain and life suddenly seemed an empty and hopeless affair, since in the bustle of departure my Galahad in khaki hadn't even a good-by glance for a certain spindle-legged girl with a tear-washed face and an incommunicable ache of desolation under her Scotch-plaid waist.

I found myself, out of a clear sky, terribly afraid of my loneliness. England and all my past, of a sudden, seemed infinitely far away. And I felt oddly anchorless and adrift in the wastes of time.

But the mood passed. And we did little singing as we headed for home again. For a Chinook, while it

made the air balmier, turned our road into a batter of mud. And the heavy grain-wagons, weeks before, had punctuated the prairie-trails with chuck-holes much preferable when frozen solid. Some of these we evaded, and some of them we succeeded in climbing out of. But one especially oozy one refused to release us, for all poor Pavlova's whining and roaring. Jamie even cut willow brush and did what he could to work it in under our sunken rear wheel. Yet all we could do was to tremble and shake there on the brink of uncertainty, with the black gumbo oozing up over one tilted running-board and no succor in sight.

I finally suggested that I get out and push. And to this Jamie eventually agreed. He even made a mat of willow branches for me to stand on, just behind the car, explaining that it would be best for me not to waste my strength until he started up the engine and gave me the word to push. But I shifted my position, in the excitement, and stood directly behind one rear wheel.

And the result was an altogether unexpected one. For as the engine raced and imparted its power to that mud-engulfed back wheel, I found myself face to face with a barrage of black and oozy batter. It drenched me as a shower-bath might. It covered and concealed me. It left me standing there, like a mummy encased in bitumen, while Pavlova climbed slowly out of the chuck-hole, moved forward a little, and came to a stop.

I was still standing there, dripping ooze, when Jamie got down from the car-seat and picked his way back to me.

The expression on his face, as he stopped and studied me, was one of such sheer bewilderment that it struck me as funny. I laughed, loudly and hysterically. I even continued to laugh as I sat down on the wet ditch-bank and tried to mop some of the mud from my face. And there was plenty of it to mop, for all Jamie could see of me, he later explained, was the whites of my eyes. So while I washed, as best I could, in the none too sparkling water that lay in the road-ditch, Jamie rinsed out my mud-encased tam and mopped my feet passably clean with prairie-grass and explained that I would have to journey the rest of the way home in a horse-blanket. My poor old gumbo-soaked coonskin-coat he spread out and tied flat on the car-top, that the good offices of wind and sun might dry it out a little.

"Jamie, you ought to think more of me than ever before," I told my husband.

"Why do you say that?" he asked, plainly perplexed.

"Because you love the soil, Jamie, and I've still got so much of it on me."

But I was glad of that interlude of light-heartedness. For our return to the ranch meant a return to toil. And Jamie, I could see, was really working too hard. He seemed soured, at times, by the acids of fatigue. Even after going to bed, beaten and bone-tired, he

failed to sleep as well as he ought. The other night, in fact, he wandered into my room and stood there listening to imaginary sounds outside in the darkness.

"What is it?" I asked as he crossed to the shack window.

"There's somebody prowling about this place," he said after almost a minute of silence.

He went back to bed, eventually, protesting that he intended to get a good watch-dog. But the next day, I noticed, he cleaned and loaded both his heavy old rifle and his double-barreled duck-gun, leaning them, much to my inward discomfort, against the corner wall of my bedroom. And he awakened me out of a sound sleep, two nights later, by once more prowling in through my darkened room.

I felt a little chill eddy up and down my spine as I saw, in the dim light, the outline of his rifle leaning across the window-sill. He watched there, without moving, for a minute or two. Then he caught up the rifle and hurried out through the shack door.

I was wide enough awake, by this time, and my heart was beating rather foolishly as I ran to the shack window. But there was nothing to be seen in the darkness. It was, I told myself, merely a coyote prowling somewhere about our brooding-boxes or a prairie fox after one of our ducks. This suspicion seemed confirmed, in fact, when I heard the sudden sharp report of a rifle-shot from the far side of the stable-end. But it frightened me, coming as it did out

of the darkness, in the dead of night. And I waited, with my heart in my mouth, until Jamie strode slowly back into the shack.

"What were you shooting at?" I asked as he restored his rifle to its place in the wall-corner.

"I don't quite know," was his slightly retarded answer.

Jamie, I realized, was not a good liar. And I felt he was holding something back from me.

"But what did you think it was?" I insisted as Jamie stood in the darkness, staring out the window.

"I thought I heard somebody out around the granary," was his rather unsatisfactory reply. "But I guess I was dreaming."

"What would anybody want out at that granary?" I asked.

"They might be after that prize wheat of mine," was his somewhat-startling reply.

"But it's not out there," I reminded him.

"Of course it's not," agreed Jamie. "But they don't happen to know it." Then he groped his way to the door. He stopped there, however, and called quietly back to me: "So let's go to sleep and forget it."

But I couldn't go to sleep. I hated the thought of an unknown enemy lurking about in the darkness. It brought a sense of menace to an otherwise peaceful and self-absorbed home. It even frightened me a little. And I would be glad, I told myself, when Jamie's wheat was finally committed to the soil awaiting it.

Yet Jamie, the next day, showed no inclination to talk about that unsettling midnight episode. He referred to it, in fact, as probably a kick-back from a nightmare he'd been having, due, no doubt, to his better-half's bad cooking. But he didn't succeed in laughing the solemnity out of the occasion. And I noticed, a little later, that he had come to an abrupt new decision with regard to the location of his prize seed plot.

Instead of seeding the summer-fallowed field at the lower end of the ranch, the land he had claimed to be the best for his purposes, he decided to sow that choicest grain of his close in to the shack, where, after putting up a four-strand wire fence, it would be under the watchful eyes of its owners.

But life left me little time for worry. Having a lodger, I found, added considerably to my work. It meant more washing and ironing and mending, more baking and planning, thoughtful as Hughie was to save me every step he could. It meant two breakfasts to get, and a midday lunch to put up for the new teacher before he ambled off on Billiken, the wiry little bronco which has been assigned to Hugh for his daily trip over to Bolton Creek. And the presence of an outsider in this restricted little home-circle, I've found, tends to keep my Jamie away from me. He's much more reserved and much more formal in his attitude toward his slightly disappointed wife. And I wonder, occasionally, if I'm merely a cross-word puzzle that's

been worked out and put aside. For most of Jamie's thought, I can see, is going to his impending crop and the problem of getting his land ready. There are times, in fact, when I feel an absurd sort of jealousy for this very soil that sustains us. It's of more importance, apparently, than the happiness of one's life-partner.

But Jamie and Hugh, I'm glad to say, get along together much better than I'd counted on. Our broad-voweled boarder, I'm afraid, doesn't figure very largely in my husband's scheme of things. He's endured, I imagine, merely as a means to an end. Yet, knowing what I know, I do what I can to keep these two men, so oddly different in make-up, decently respectful to each other. And Hughie's presence here, I think, tends to keep our existence from being merely an animal one. It gives us something more than plows and tractor-parts and pig-feed and milk-cows and manure-spreading to talk about. It brings us the magazines and papers we'd solemnly decided as beyond our means and keeps us tenuously in touch with the outside world. Now and then, in fact, Jamie and Hugh get into some great old arguments. And any reference to school history is invariably a signal to fight the War of the Revolution all over again. Hugh, of course, looks at the thing from the English standpoint, while Jamie stubbornly regards the revolt of the Colonies as a struggle of embattled seraphim against the Powers of Evil. My husband, indeed, impresses me as slightly unfair to

England, claiming that the dole and the old-age pension fund is converting the Motherland into a sort of loafer's paradise. He compares it to a fading and declining Rome, when the mob lived on bread and money distributed to them even as the empire of the Cæsars was crumbling under their feet. Yes, the English were doomed. And their class system was all wrong. And they lived too much in the past. And they'd never yet wakened up to the value of machinery. And instead of taking their hats off to the Past, they ought to be taking off their coats to the Future!

Then Hughie, without losing his temper, would venture an impersonal word or two about personal liberty and the Volstead Act, or fundamentalism in Tennessee, or political corruption in certain big cities. Or the argument might be over the Wheat Pool, or who won the Great War, or whether a college education should be classical or scientific, or whether America or England really represented the more democratic form of government. And the two of them would be at it again, as hot and heavy as ever, until I'd be forced to remind Hugh that he had the rest of his monthly test-papers to mark and suggest to Jamie that I couldn't possibly put a new seat in his overalls until the same were removed from his person.

Yet these two men, I begin to feel, nurse a secret and slowly growing respect for each other. Hugh, I think, admires Jamie for his strength and his grim single-mindedness of purpose, for the bulldog tenacity

with which he's willing to work toward a given end. And Jamie, I fancy, is achieving a due regard for the younger man's slightly old-fashioned kindliness and code of honor, for that which, in more southerly climes, converts "*Palabro inglese*" into a sort of final assurance of good faith.

Chapter Twenty

BUT life, I've just discovered, is something more than a duel of words. And, while we're talking so glibly about the fall of Rome, a tremor can go through our own walls.

For when I was alone in the shack yesterday, and Jamie was at work on the far side of the ranch, a long and rakish-looking open car swung into our place and came to a stop insolently close to our very doorstep.

It held, I noticed, only one man, a thick-shouldered and bullet-headed stranger who lost no time about scrambling down from the driver's seat and assaulting my shack door with his knuckles.

I had just got my potato-water ready and was mixing up a batch of bread-dough when that unexpected caller made his appearance. So, before answering his knock, which he even more peremptorily repeated, I had to mop a little of the batter from my over-sticky hands. And, when I finally swung the door open, I was in none too amiable a frame of mind.

Instead of turning out to be a radio pedler or a house-to-house dispenser of cream-separators, however, he proved to be something surprisingly different.

"Where's your husband?" my visitor barked out at me as he stepped unbidden into the room.

"He's at work on his land," I answered with an achieved and reproving quietness. And as the response to that was merely a grunt, I casually inquired the meaning of a visit that impressed me as both abrupt and unwelcome.

The intruder, for answer, lifted his coat-edge and flashed a rather authoritative-looking metal badge in my face.

"What's the meaning of that?" I still quietly enough inquired.

"It means, lady, that I happen to be acting for the sheriff of this district," he said with an unabashed sort of fortitude.

"And why are you here?" I demanded, observing, for the first time, the ugly-looking revolver that he carried in a belt-holster at his side.

"To make a seizure," was his curt reply, with a quick glance around that humble little shack that seemed to shrink up with a still newer humbleness.

I knew little about law and legal processes in the country of my adoption. But, much as I disliked and mistrusted that bullet-headed stranger's appearance, the badge under his coat-lapel looked authentic enough to my untutored eyes.

"Then you'd better wait until I call my husband," I promptly suggested.

"No, don't bother about that," he said as he blocked my way to the door. "I can get what I want right here."

"What do you want?" I asked.

"What's of value in this dump?" he countered as he flung open first one door and then another. And, disturbed as I was in mind, I soon found my resentment growing a trifle stronger than my fears.

"Before this goes any further," I announced, stubbornly fortified by the good old English belief that one's home was always one's castle, "I want to know just what authority you have for coming in here."

"I've told you that," was his coarsely impatient retort. "And if I get any more yapping out of you I'll take you along with me."

"Where'll you take me?" I demanded with the not unnatural curiosity of the innocent.

"Where you'll cool your heels in a jail-cell," proclaimed the intruder as he swung open the Barracks door and caught sight of the nine sacks of seed-grain partly covered by their patched old tarpaulin.

"This'll do me," he said with a croak of triumph.

I knew, as he spoke, that he meant Jamie's prize wheat. And I knew what the loss of that wheat would mean to my husband. On it hung all his hopes for the future. For it he had toiled and planned and given the best years of his life. Because of it he had faced hardship and loneliness, had sacrificed the things that made other men happy, had even surrendered what had once seemed the peace and security of his little prairie home. And Jamie, I suspected, would have given up his life before giving up that wheat.

But I was alone, and uncertain of my rights, and in doubt as to what could be done. And as I stood there, praying for Jamie to come to me, as Wellington must have prayed for Blucher, I realized that something must be done, and done at once.

Yet the first move, I discovered, was to come from my bullet-headed enemy. And I had no shadow of doubt, by this time, that he was indeed my enemy.

"Sit down there," he commanded, motioning me toward Jamie's home-made armchair, the one heavy chair in the room.

When I declined to sit down he suddenly swung about and pushed me none too gently into the chair. Then, before I quite knew what he was about, he jerked a curtain from the shack-window, twisted it into a rope-like strand, and tied me where I sat. He tied me up as expeditiously as a busy chef trusses a dressed capon, snatching a second curtain from the window to make sure of his job.

His tight-drawn knots hurt my wrists. But that ache of bruised flesh seemed trivial before the mounting anguish, the mental anguish, that took possession of me as I sat helpless and watched him shoulder his first sack of Jamie's wheat and carry it out to his waiting car. For at that act of violence all my earlier and unformulated suspicions seemed suddenly confirmed. This man, I knew, was not an agent of the law. His ridiculous metal badge was merely a mask. His claim of being a sheriff's deputy was merely a cheap disguise.

He was nothing better than a thief, a thief intent on carrying away another man's wealth. And I owed it to Jamie to stop him.

But I seemed helpless. Try as I might, I could not free my imprisoned hands. Strain and twist and tug as I could, I seemed unable to work myself free. And that bullet-headed intruder knew it. At the moment, in fact, he was wasting precious little thought on me. He seemed more worried, apparently, about some possible interruption from outside. He looked about, in the open doorway, singularly like a gopher looking about from its sandpile.

Yet I didn't altogether give up. I warned myself to keep my wits about me. And I emulated the boa-constrictor, every time the chance came, and writhed and twisted with all the strength at my command—and six months of prairie-work, I found, had left me a trifle more muscular than I'd imagined. I even saw, as the third grain-sack was carried out to the car in the dooryard, that my struggles had splintered and loosened one of the back-spindles of the big chair, slightly relieving the curtain-rope about my right wrist. By the time the fourth sack went out to its resting-place in the car tonneau I had that hand free, though I sat impassive again as my enemy circled crooningly back to the Barracks. Yet too much precious time would be taken up, I remembered, before I could fight myself entirely free. And a new thought came to me.

I waited until the burdened broad shoulder was once

more moving out through the open shack door, up-tilted under its big bag of grain. Then, stooping forward, I tottered to my feet. I balanced there, with the heavy chair still bound to my back. Then, like a snail carrying its shell, I staggered into my bedroom, where I knew Jamie's rifle to be leaning against the wall corner.

I was powerless, of course, to direct it. All I could do, with one hand still bound, was to lean the heavy barrel on the sill of the open shack window and pull the trigger. For I knew the sound of a rifle-shot, in that clear northern air, would easily be heard by Jamie. And having heard it, he would surely strike homeward to determine its meaning.

The report was followed by a moment or two of utter silence. And for one foolish moment I tried to believe that my enemy had taken to his heels. But I was wrong in that. For he was upon me, almost before I could swing about from the window, emitting a blasphemous oath or two as he jerked the rifle from my fingers. Then, with deliberately vicious roughness, he dragged chair and me back to the living-room, where, after shaking me as a terrier sometimes shakes a rat, he flung me stunned and shaking into the far corner of the room.

I wasn't as stunned, however, as I pretended. Still again I cautioned myself, as I lay there quivering at the thought of such indignities, to keep my wits about me. And as my oppressor went back to his grain-sacks,

a trifle more hurriedly than before, I tugged and strained at the curtain-strands still keeping me a prisoner.

I had my left hand free, by the time he had come back for his last bag of grain. And by the time he had carried it out through the shack door I had slipped noiselessly into the bedroom, where the overlooked duck-gun still stood.

Six seconds later I was at the shack door, with that gun in my none too steady hands. The bullet-headed stranger stood at the back of his car, thrusting the last precious bag of Jamie's prize seed farther over on the sack-crowded seat. And I didn't even wait for him to turn around.

"Put up your hands," I said as determinedly as I was able.

And the command, I remembered in even that moment of tension, must have come from cinemas of cowboy life that I had witnessed and watched and thrilled over in my carefree girlhood. But in this one, instead of being a spectator, I was a participant. And it seemed without the glamour of the earlier experience.

My enemy turned about, oddly pop-eyed at the gun-barrel pointing directly toward his heart. His face worked, rather foolishly. But he slowly if somewhat dazedly lifted his huge hands until they were on a level with his ears.

"Now back away from that car," I commanded, doing my best to keep both my voice and my gun-

barrel as steady as possible. But my weapon, I noticed, indulged in some altogether undignified waverings.

So, instead of obeying that command, my enemy broke into a short and ugly laugh. That laugh bewildered me. For, mirthless as it was, I could decipher no reason for it. And I was uncertain of myself. It was only as I caught sight of the big hand quietly moving toward the belt-holster that I realized he was contemptuously disregarding the threat of a chicken-hearted woman who didn't even know how to balance a gun. And for a moment there was murder in my heart. I decided to show him that two could play at this wild-west game of violence. Never, I told myself, would I stand idly aside and see my Jamie's last hope of success swept away.

Yet even as I stood there, knowing that I had to shoot before that frowning-eyed thief shot me, I shuddered inwardly at the thought of taking a human life. I had little time for deliberation. But the picture of a handful of leaden pellets tearing through human entrails rather sickened me. And some impulse beyond my comprehension prompted me to lower my barrel a little. It would eventually be as effective, I must have decided, to give him both charges, not through the body, but through the legs. And with that thought somewhere at the back of my brain I pulled both triggers.

The recoil was greater than I had expected, for the

gun-stock, kicking back, struck my chin and sent a thin trickle of blood down my face. And I must have closed my eyes, as I fired, for my enemy, leaping grotesquely aside, escaped the flying shot. Instead of seeing him writhing in agony on the trodden soil of my doorway, as I had so gruesomely anticipated, I beheld him circle nimbly about the motor-car and determinedly climb into the driver's seat.

I wasn't a rector's daughter, at the moment. I was no longer the sedately brought up English girl who once timidly shut herself between four walls when the grouse-shooting started on the moors a half-mile beyond her book-lined home. I was Boadicea fighting against Paulinos. I was Jeanneton Darc defending Compiègne. I was a blood-stained and wild-eyed Fury, fighting for home and faith. The last thin lacquering of civilization fell away from me as I ran into the house, caught up the empty rifle that had been flung into a corner of the Barracks, found the cardboard box where Jamie kept his shells, and with foolishly shaking hands tried to reload the rifle. I could hear the whine and pop of the car as it got under way. And the thought that I might yet lose Jamie's wheat made my fingers still more unsteady. But I finally fitted the shell to its chamber, closed the breech-gadget and ran to the still open shack door.

There I all but collided with a breathless and startled Jamie.

And, woman-like, I felt the strength suddenly ooze

out of my body, remembering a stronger arm was near by to succor me in my hour of need.

"What's it mean?" asked Jamie, still panting, but taking the rifle out of my hands as he spoke.

"Oh, Jamie, your wheat!" I cried. "They're stealing your wheat."

His quick glance went down to the blood on my chin.

"Are you hurt?" he questioned. His eyes were hard, and his thoughts, I knew, were already away from me.

"No, no," I answered, and answered in a quavering sort of shout. "But that's your wheat they're carrying off."

Jamie said nothing more. Even as I stood there, pointing across the prairie to where a low and mud-covered car was lurching and pounding along the trail, he caught up the rifle, dodged into the house and returned with a handful of shells. Then he ran toward the outer corner of the corral, where Pavlova stood with three Leghorn hens perched on her sun-bleached cowl. And without even removing those startled hens he leaped for the driver's seat.

I ran after him. And as his engine roared into life I tried, in the excitement, to climb up beside him. But he pushed me bruskiy aside.

"Oh, Jamie, I want to go with you," I cried, foreseeing what was ahead of him.

"You've had enough," he called down over his shoulder. "I'll finish this business."

"But he'll kill you," I called out in an uncontrolled wail of womanly terror.

Yet Jamie, as he swept away, didn't even seem to hear me. I could see him, bent low over the wheel, as he bounded out on the open trail and went roaring after that disappearing car that was carrying off something much more precious to him than a slightly bruised and a blunderingly inefficient wife.

Chapter Twenty-One

I NURSED the strange feeling, as I stood staring after Jamie's car disappearing in the distance, that the clock of the world had been turned back for a century or two. I didn't seem a twentieth-century wheat-rancher's wife, but the mate of an ox-driving pioneer adventuring into a new and hostile country. I began to realize, in fact, what earlier women, women in covered wagons and stage-coaches and Red-River carts, must have gone through when Comanches and Blackfeet beset their path and confronted their men-folk with sudden battle. And remembering such things, I couldn't remain idle while my husband's life was in danger.

So, with hands that were still unsteady, I saddled Buckshot and swung up into the saddle. And, with blood-stains still on my chin and dried flour-paste between my fingers, and with the skirt of my house-dress drawn grotesquely up about my knees, I headed for the open trail. I was conscious of numerous small aches in my body and I must have looked alarmingly like a Reservation squaw heading for a potlatch. But there was a normalizing sort of relief in tearing along that empty prairie roadway, no matter what lay ahead of me. Yet I couldn't entirely rid myself of the fear that I was riding into bloodshed. Jamie, I knew, was in a fighting mood. And he'd show scant mercy to the

bullet-headed stranger making off with his seed-wheat. Yet that stranger was armed and not altogether ignorant of what he had to face. He'd be equally desperate, once his pursuer had him cornered. And as Buckshot tore along the undulating narrow trail I pictured myself as a widow, all in black, with a broken heart and a mortgaged ranch and no strong-armed man to till its weed-grown acres.

I even looked down, as I rode, in search of blood-stains along the way. But the road remained an empty one. And, in spite of all my fears, I began to feel foolish. Buckshot himself even lost a little of his earlier enthusiasm for speed and slackened his stride into a more workaday pace. And I was beginning to wonder if my chase was to carry me all the way into Elk Crossing, when I caught sight of a car approaching along the lonely prairie trail.

I pressed on, with a strange tightness in my chest, trying to get a clearer view of that unknown car as it came closer and closer. Then I breathed again. For the man in the driver's seat, I could see, was my Jamie,—my Jamie, still alive and looking considerably like an underfed undertaker well powdered with alkali-dust.

"What are you doing here?" he asked with altogether unnecessary sternness as he stopped beside the snorting Buckshot.

"I came to find you," I said as steadily as I could. He was in no mood, I realized, for heroics.

"I told you to stay home," he reminded me.

"Are you all right?" I asked, wondering why I should be so absurdly anxious for some more intimate word or two from him.

"Of course I'm all right," was his patiently impatient retort.

"But your wheat?" I questioned.

"It's gone," said Jamie. And I noticed, for the first time, how gray and gaunt his face was. "But this thing's not settled yet," he added as he reached for his gear-shift. "And I want you to come with me."

"Where?" I asked.

"You'll know that later," he said as he started up his engine. "Follow me back to the shack."

So, feeling oddly bruised in body and spirit, I cantered meekly after Pavlova, wondering why my Jamie couldn't be decently polite to his life-partner or at least wait for her to keep up with him.

I had merely time, when I arrived at the shack, to scribble a note for Hugh, scrub the blood-marks from my chin, and scramble into my coonskin coat.

"Where are we going?" I asked, for the second time, as we headed for the open trail.

"Over to McDoel's," answered Jamie.

"Why to McDoel's?" I inquired, finding it a trifle hard to remain patient in the face of a reticence that impressed me as rather uncalled for.

"Because the man who carried off that wheat of mine," explained Jamie after a glance at my indignant face, "was Spike Forgan. And Forgan's been on Mc-

Doel's pay-roll for over three years now. He takes his prize stock about to different cattle shows, mostly in the States, and does his occasional dirty work for him."

"He told me he was a sheriff's man, making a seizure," I explained.

And Jamie, for one of the few times in his life, swore quietly and venomously.

"That's about their size," he proclaimed, "to plot against an unprotected woman!"

"But how do you know it was McDoel's man?" I asked.

"Because I saw him," answered Jamie.

"When?" I inquired.

"I got within two hundred yards of him, before those rotten trails blew my front tire. And that put me out of the running. But this thing's not ended yet."

"But why should McDoel try to steal your wheat?" was my next question.

"Because he's the prize-grabber of this district," was the impassioned reply. "And because he'd do anything to break me."

This required a little time for consideration.

"And what are you going to say to him?" I quietly inquired.

"We'll see," retorted Jamie with a tightening of the jaw-muscles as he turned in through a pair of sepulchral white gate-pillars and followed a pebbled drive that led up to the assertively imposing house of the

cattle-king. This house, I noticed, stood on a knoll, surrounded by naïvely designed garden-plots shaped like anchors, with shrubs still sheathed in bagging and a scattering of rather awful lawn statuary. There was even an iron fountain held up by an unabashed metallic lady whose undulatory torso stood an open and never-ending announcement of adequate lactation. But the whole place, with its uglified opulence and its hybridized French gables and its American lightning-rods and its German copper gutters and oversized weather-vane, impressed me as in execrable taste.

Jamie, when he came to a stop in the Spanish-tiled porte-cochère, neither addressed me nor waited for me to descend from my seat. He tumbled out of the car and strode toward the white-painted bunk-house on the far side of a huge corral, where a couple of cow-hands were lounging against the whitewashed bars.

I had no means of knowing what he said to them. But their talk together, from where I sat, seemed sufficiently quiet and non-committal. I was even beginning to hope that an encounter which threatened to be both foolish and self-defeating might be deferred until hot blood cooled down a bit. But that hope proved a still-born one. For the manorial big door opened as I sat there and Bull McDoel himself stepped down into the porte-cochère.

He was bareheaded, and held a lighted cigar in his hand, and seemed very much at home as he sauntered

over to where I sat. Yet his shrewd eyes, for all his smile, lost no time in a quick study of my face.

"This is an unexpected honor," he said with the merest trace of mockery in his thick voice. "And, being English, I guess a cup of tea is in order."

I didn't answer him. I sat silent, not through fear, but more because it had just occurred to me that passion, after all, solves few earthly problems. And there were more ways than one, I remembered, of winning a fight.

"Well?" he said with his thick hand resting on the car door.

"I was just wondering," I finally observed, "if we couldn't get along better as friends, rather than enemies."

I knew, as I saw his slightly quizzical smile, that the man was quite fearless.

"How about your big fire-eater over there?" he casually inquired. And I also knew that he wasn't as oblivious to Jamie's presence as he at first pretended.

"Perhaps he has his reasons for being that way," I suggested.

McDoel laughed quietly.

"This section doesn't seem to be big enough for two prize winners," he affirmed. He let his gaze lock with mine. "And there's one prize he doesn't deserve."

"Does that mean me?" I asked, without wincing.

"It does."

I found the courage to face him. It was no time, I

remembered, for half-measures. And I was tired of compromises.

"I don't mean as much, apparently, to my husband as his wheat does. That wheat's just been stolen. And he thinks you could get it back for him. Would you do that, if I promised you my—my friendship?"

"I could try," conceded McDoel.

"But I'd have to be certain."

"So would I," proclaimed my cool-eyed king of cattle.

"When I make a promise," I affirmed, "I keep it."

"That fact hasn't escaped me," admitted the caliph in tweeds. "But you understand, of course, it would mean deciding between Big Jim and me."

"Can you get that wheat back?" I asked, since candor seemed to be the order of the day.

"I imagine I could," he said.

"When?" I exacted.

But that question, beyond a temporizing shoulder-shrug, remained unanswered. For Jamie, the next moment, came striding up to us. And McDoel merely stood there, indolently relaxed, as the taller man came to a stop within two paces of him. Neither spoke. But the two of them, I could see, were silently measuring each other.

"Well, your scheme worked out, didn't it?" challenged Jamie. He spoke quietly enough. Yet I knew, by the tremor in his voice and the grayness about his lips, that his quietness was merely a mask.

"What scheme?" asked McDoel as he tapped the ashes from his cigar-end.

"Your plan for stealing my prize wheat," answered Jamie, less quietly than before.

"What are you driving at?" demanded McDoel.

And again the two men stood measuring each other.

"At the fact that your man Forgan has just stolen nine bags of seed-wheat," averred Jamie, still holding himself in, as though waiting for his anger to boil up to the executive point.

McDoel, with a narrowing eye, inspected his enemy.

"You'd better get your facts right," he coolly asserted, "before shooting off your fireworks."

"I've got 'em right," retorted Jamie, "and they lead straight to you and Spike Forgan."

"Forgan's not my man," announced McDoel. "He was fired from here over a week ago. And any barn-rifling he may have done he's done entirely on his own hook."

It sounded plausible enough. But it made small impression on my rage-swept Jamie.

"That's a bloody lie," he shouted, no longer under control.

"Then find Forgan and get the facts," retorted McDoel with cool inspection of his cigar-ash.

It was then that I slipped down out of my seat. For I could foresee what was about to happen. And that day had already confronted me with a trifle too much violence.

"Jamie," I cried as I caught at the sinewy brown forearm behind the clenched fist.

"Keep out of this," he commanded, trying to shake himself free. But I clung to him like a limpet.

"This is foolish," I panted. "It's worse than foolish. And I won't see it go on."

"I know what I'm doing," proclaimed my anger-drunk husband.

"You don't," I cried. "You don't understand."

"Are you siding with that cow-thief?" demanded Jamie with the last of his color gone.

"I'm siding with no one," I protested. "But I won't have you brawling this way over things that aren't settled by fist-fights."

McDoel, who had declined to retreat an inch, stood regarding me with a sort of modified approval.

"I'm glad to see," he announced, "there's some one in the family with a grain of horse-sense."

But I turned back to Jamie.

"I want you to come home," I said, still standing close to him.

"While that pole-cat pays off Forgan and lets him slip away across the Line?"

"But you're facing a bigger job than hounding a bullet-headed sneak-thief into a court-room," I reminded him.

"D'you suppose I'll take this sort of thing lying down?" Jamie huskily demanded.

"But how is this going to get your wheat back?"

"Can you suggest a better way?" he barked out at me. There was something in his voice almost like hate. And it was my turn to be caught up and swept away by a tide over which I had no control.

"Yes," I abandonedly cried. "And I'm going to follow it. This man knows where your wheat is. And he's going to give it back to you. You're going to get your precious wheat. It's all you seem to live for. It's all that counts with you. You're buried in it. And you may as well be happy again. For you're getting it back cheap. All you're losing by it is a wife you've never loved!"

He fell back a step or two and stood, gray-faced and silent, staring down at me.

"Why do you say I'm losing you?" he finally asked.

"Because my home, from now on, is going to be under this roof," I cried, with my own voice sounding strange in my ears. "I've made my bargain and I'm going where I'm wanted."

"So it was a bargain?" said Jamie, looking cold-eyed from McDoel to me. Then he turned back to McDoel. "And you know where my wheat is?" he intoned, dangerously quiet.

"Don't be too sure of that," protested McDoel. But his smile was a one-sided one.

"Oh, I'll be sure of it," affirmed Jamie, "before I'm through with you." He swung about to me, his eyes like steel. "Get in that car," he commanded.

"Why should I?" I asked, without moving. But the

ghost of some cave-woman ancestor, deep down in my blood, sighed gratefully at that show of brutality.

"Because you're still my wife," said Jamie, more stony-eyed than ever.

"That," I found the courage to assert, "doesn't seem to mean much."

"Then I'll make it. For you're coming back where you belong!" And without further speech or loss of time he picked me up, picked me up where I stood, as though I were a child, and swung me none too gently into the car seat. Then he turned back to McDoel.

"And as for you, you philandering skunk, you'll get what's coming to you. You're not going to break up my family, and you're not going to hijack me out of that wheat. Not while I'm above ground! I'll get it back, every bag of it, and I'll do it in my own way."

"What'll you do?" inquired McDoel, his voice provocatively low.

"I'll put you where you belong."

"That," affirmed the man so contemplatively puffing at his cigar, "may take considerably more than loose talk."

"Then you're going to get a damned sight more than talk," cried Jamie, disturbingly tight-lipped.

"When and how?" inquired McDoel, with a glance at his cigar-ash. And that final taunt must have been the final straw, for my husband's reply came with unexpected promptness.

"Here and now!" he croaked. And before I gathered the full meaning of that throaty cry the clenched brown fist shot forward. It struck mallet-like against the rubicund and satirically smiling face, throwing the head up and back as the thick figure fell prone on the pebbled driveway.

Jamie stood over that twitching figure, for a moment or two. Then, with a rather brutish snort of satisfaction, he turned back to the car, climbed into the driver's seat and started up his engine.

Chapter Twenty-Two

MORE than ever, the last two or three days, my own husband seems like a stranger to me. He doesn't exactly avoid my presence, but when the exigencies of daily life bring us together he speaks only when spoken to. And his eyes, I notice, never look openly and frankly into mine. He treats me with a stiff-backed sort of respect, yet he holds himself so remote, every time we're together, that even poor Hugh is beginning to worry over a situation which he can't quite comprehend.

Jamie, however, hasn't loitered much about this shack. He's had other fish to fry. For the last two days, in fact, he's been out on the war-path, conferring with the police at the Crossing, telephoning about the country from the Wilmot ranch-house, and running down false clues as to the whereabouts of Spike Forgan. For all Jamie has thought about, of course, is his lost wheat.

I can understand, in a way, how my husband must feel about that stolen seed-grain. It was his life's work, his hope for happier days. And having it carried off by ruthless strangers must have been about as bad as having one's only child abducted. It's like having some one you loved lost on the midnight prairie, with the blood-chilling thought that the miss-

ing one might never be recovered. And that fear, I knew, was at the base of Jamie's tight-lipped abstraction. He was sick and suffering. And allowances had to be made for him.

But I could do nothing to help him. I'd had my fling, along that line, and it had ended in failure. I was unwilling even to question him. All I could do, as he set out on his mysterious trips, with his rifle in the car seat beside him, was to sit tight and hope for the best. The closest I came to the fringe of his activities, in fact, was when I was visited by a very handsome Mountie, who asked me a great many questions, and looked very solemn and wise, and in departing voiced the decision of the authorities that McDoel was in no way implicated, and that his ex-cow-hand had discreetly headed for the Montana border.

Yet sitting tight, with me, didn't exactly mean idleness. For work, I remembered, was a good anesthetic; and there's always enough of it about a prairie-ranch, apparently, with the coming of spring. For spring, I've just realized, has finally come to this northern country. All to-day a great arch, reminding me of a rainbow that's been run through God's clothes-wringer, has bridged our western sky. And all day, in spite of the storm and stress in human hearts, the soft and balmy breath of the Chinook wind has drifted over this winter-bleached land. The last trace of snow has gone, even from the ravines, and down every hollow trickles and flashes a silver stream. Every slough

and swamp-hole is a blithe and shimmering lake where wild ducks squabble and swim and yellow-legged snipes wheel and circle about and cinnamon-colored curlews call from the oozy shore-lines. From the flattened and golden-brown grass of our pasture-land, to-day, I heard a pair of killdeer justifying their name by crying out to me, over and over again, their thin-noted complaint of "Kill-deer! Kill-deer!"

But the mud is still with us, for yards and corrals and trails haven't yet dried out and on especially warm days a Scotch-mist of vapor floats up from the wet fields where the plowed land looks almost black in the slanting light. There are no flowers and no greenery, as yet, and it's all startlingly different from spring in England, where the vernal awakening is so gradual and the leafy unfolding of summer is such a soft and gentle transition from cold to warmth. Here it seems all hurry and bustle, a sort of passionate impatience to speed up even the periods of nature, as though the world, having slept over-long, felt the need for sudden effort.

But this afternoon brought me other things to think about. For my handsome Mountie, after all, was wrong in his surmise. And the official efforts to round up Jamie's wheat-thief resulted in nothing worthy of record. It was, in fact, a tow-headed little Finn, a pupil of Hugh's, who casually reported to his teacher that he had seen an open car filled with grain-bags hidden away in a small poplar-grove not far from

Graveyard Coulee. And that bright-eyed little tow-head, in doing so, proved the god from the machine.

For Hugh, taking destiny in his own hands, promptly declared a half-holiday and came racing home on Billiken. And once there he lost no time in informing Jamie of the discovery. I could see the two men conferring, for a minute or two, out under the shadow of the horse-stables. Then, disturbingly silent, they strode into the house, where one possessed himself of the rifle and the other of the shotgun from my room-corner. I had no knowledge of where they were headed or what enterprise was on foot. But it chilled my blood to see those two men, who stood closest to me in all this world, march so purposefully out to the waiting Pavlova, stow away their firearms, and go tearing off over the open prairie.

I was worried and nerve-wracked, try as I might to drug myself with work. But my thoughts were seldom on the things I was doing. And as the afternoon wore away that tingling sense of tension increased. I prepared supper, automatically, and waited an hour and then ate alone. I sat there, depressed by the two empty chairs so blankly confronting me. Then I set to work again, knowing that animals had to be fed and evening chores faced. But as night came on and the wine-glow faded from the low-lying Rockies I began to wonder if a husband in name only wasn't a little better than no husband at all. And hope curled up like a sick kitten and prepared to die.

It wasn't until nearly midnight that I heard the familiar roar and rattle of Pavlova outside in the darkness. And when Hugh came in alone, mud-covered and carrying both the rifle and gun, my knees went weak.

"Where's Jamie?" I gasped, reaching out to the table-edge for support.

Hughie's laugh was curt but kindly.

"He's bringing in his wheat," he casually announced as, having restored the firearms to their corner, he stood cryptically studying my face.

"Is—is he all right?" I questioned with a quaver that made Hugh laugh again.

And I knew, in my bones, that this facing of peril had in some way brought the two men closer together.

"Certainly," answered Hugh. "Or he ought to be, after this. For he's got every last bag of that seed-grain back again."

I sank weakly into a chair. For my body seemed merely a cork, washed back and forth by recurring waves of relief.

"Tell me about it," I somewhat huskily asked as Hughie's eye traveled hungrily on to the still laden supper-table.

But there wasn't, after all, a great deal to tell. Spike Forgan, they found, was no longer hiding out at Graveyard Coulee, so dolorously named, I learned, because a stampeding cattle-herd had once gone over a cut-bank and left their bones to bleach there in the

sun. But Jamie found Spike's car tracks and trailed them to McPherson's Muskeg, where they came up with the car, bogged axle-deep at the swamp-edge. Forgan had fired at them three times, from cover, and Jamie, from the car-back, had returned shot for shot. Then Forgan, knowing the game was up, slipped away through the scrub-willow and made his escape in a friendly maze of sedge and underbrush. And Jamie, whose only thought was of his seed-wheat, had piled the nine sacks in Pavlova and headed for home.

"He's a hard fighter, that man of yours," observed Hugh, not without a note of admiration.

"He seems to prefer that sort of life," I retorted, not without my own note of bitterness.

"He won't always want to fight," said kindly old Hugh with a condoning pat on my hand-back. But any hope I may have wrung from that assurance didn't last long. For the door opened and my lost husband appeared with a grain-sack balanced on his shoulder.

"I'm so glad, Jamie, you've got your wheat back," I said as I went to meet him.

His face was more drawn and his clothes more mud-covered, I noticed, than Hugh's.

"Thanks," he said with listless weariness as he walked on to his cubby-hole of a bedroom with the grain-sack over his shoulder. He was storing it away, I suppose, where it would be safest. But he reminded me, shaggy-headed and mud-encased, of a stone-age hunter carrying a recaptured bride back to his cave.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I'VE a liking, I find, for American slang. It's so graphic and expressive, so different from the idiom of my native land. In England I'd say "My word!" In America I say "Oh, boy!" And out here "Righto" becomes "O.K." To pick a lemon (as poor Jamie did) and find that you're a four-flusher (as I seem to be doing) is certainly a terse way of expressing a more or less complicated situation. But I'm not going to get cold feet and be a flop.

Pompous old Jamie doesn't approve of such *patois*. I may be a washout, but he doesn't like my saying so. And when Bull McDoel was being discussed, the other evening, and I boldly suggested there was a nigger behind the wood-pile somewhere, Jamie merely inspected me with a pitying eye and told me to get my language straight.

On another occasion, when my lean-jowled lord had ignored me by keeping his nose in a book of chemistry all evening, I casually asked Hugh if the modern American had ever impressed him as amazingly like the Indian.

"Why do you say that?" demanded Jamie, before Hugh had a chance to answer me.

And it was my turn to bestow a pitying glance on my Better-Half.

"Because I seem to discern," I told him, "some cynic devil in your blood that guards the redskin's dry reserve."

"What does that mean?" asked Jamie, suspecting, I fancy, that I was covertly ridiculing a spirit that I had so dismally failed to understand.

"It's Kipling," I explained, "and it means, I think, that you haven't yet irrigated the alkali out of that arid American soul of yours."

Jamie sat silent a moment, thinking this over.

"Perhaps it's not as arid as you've been led to believe," he finally ventured.

"Well, I'm from Missouri," I answered.

But he merely smiled, in an abstracted sort of way, as though my parade of western idiom proved more engaging than my efforts to break down his reserve.

Thanks to Hughie's book-shelf, however, I've been learning something about those "bride-ships" that used to come out to America, especially to the earlier French colonies in the days of the Regency, when settlements without a petticoat or a powder-puff were for ever crying: "Send us wives, O King!" And, to my secret consternation, I discovered that "*les filles de la casette*" who were sent were mostly hussies, painted strollers of the street and wanton ladies whom the provost of Paris preferred out of his jails and daughters of joy from the prison hospital of La Salpêtrière and "correction girls" and redemptioners who meekly promised to lead a much tamer life in a wilder environment.

It made my thoughts turn back to Aggie Hathaway and the Reverend Samuel's motley horde of husband-hunters. And *I* had been one of them. It was small wonder, I realized, that James Bentley Gilson looked upon me with suspicion. To him I was still a "casket-girl" of dubious origin and unpredictable character. And all I could do was to sit tight and wait for the time to prove that I was still worth my salt. I could merely lie at his feet, an unclaimed treasure, awaiting my lord's pleasure. It would be easier, I sometimes feel, if I had the power to hate him.

But there's the rub.

I don't hate my Jamie. I never could, even though they *did* fling me at his head and made him lead me dutifully home, like a spavined bronco won at a cross-roads raffle. And no matter how neat your ankles, you can't poke them down a man's throat. But Jamie's mind, apparently, isn't on ankles. And the male is a dull-witted mortal. For it escaped even the Prince's attention, until he found the glass slipper went on without a shoe-horn, that Cinderella had the smallest foot in the family.

But blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. And every dog has his day. So, true to my mud-lark tradition, I'm making the best of things. I'm trying, as I carry on, to protect myself by a resolute if somewhat worldly sagacity. I refuse to think of the past, though I dreamed, last night, that I was walking through an English garden, cutting a basket

of roses while an early nightingale sang from a woodland ornamented with eight iron statues of James Bentley Gilson crowned with fillets of wheat-straw. It was foolish, of course, and I defy any Freudian to make sense of it.

But life humbles us. And in our humility, I find, we can be exceedingly grateful for small things.

One of those small things has just been brought home to me by the ever-thoughtful Hugh, in the shape of a wire-hair terrier pup who answers to the name of Terry. Terry is a little devil, and I can well understand how any frugal-minded rancher would be willing to give him away. But I'm learning to love him. He chews my slippers and macerates the tail-end of our calf-skin rug and drags away my dish-towels and gnaws on the chair-legs and chases the indignant hens from my door-step. Yet, since Terry came, this shack is not such a lonesome place. And I like to have him clamber up on my lap and lie there, like a baby, as I peel my potatoes or do a bit of darning. For Terry not only gives me something to love, but also loves me back, and, unlike blind and blundering human beings, isn't ashamed to show it.

Another gift has come to me, a gift over which I've expended considerable thought. For last Sunday Mrs. Tipton drove over to the ranch, and with her brought not only a plump-cheeked baby for my inspection, but also a geranium-plant for one of my window-sills. That none too robust geranium is growing out of a tomato-

tin, with a sickly promise of bloom on one stalk. Yet I have placed it in our sunniest window, where it stands, a meager effort at beautification, to remind me how bald life can sometimes become and how far removed from opulence I stand.

For Jamie and I, I begin to suspect, are becoming a couple of drudges. We are the victims of a terrible frugality, where every penny is counted and not a scrap is wasted. I even ask myself if I'm not getting miserly. For life, with us, has been stripped to the deck-boards. Every crust is saved, every old newspaper put by, every bottle and bit of string stowed away. My potato-chopper is a baking-powder tin with half a dozen holes punched in its bottom. Every stump of candle-end and every nail and bit of board is treasured. Even my soap-wrappers are carefully laid away, for when you get a hundred of them you get a tuppenny glass butter-dish. My wash-rag is made from an old salt-sack and my salt-holder once served as a tobacco-can. My dish-towels are conjured up from old bagging, and every tatter of cotton or wool is stowed away for the future making of braided bed-rugs. Every turnip-rind, every potato-paring, every ounce of fat and every drop of skim-milk, is saved and set aside, since pigs must be fattened and calves must be fed. Even my dishwater goes to the trough in our porkers' pen, where I keep a stick about the size of a cricket-bat, as moral suasion to prevent the sturdier rooters from elbowing aside the weaklings. For we have a battle to win. And

victory, apparently, comes through small things. Yet I don't seem to mind seeing my fingers turn black with potato-stains. And I don't bother about my hands growing hard. What worries me is the ghostlier thought that one's heart may harden at the same time. When Hughie brought three dozen oranges back from the Crossing last Saturday, I almost forgot to thank him. I was too busy remembering how we must be careful about saving the peel, to make marmalade with.

But one thing, glory be, hasn't been entirely taken away from me. Spring is here and all the outer world seems a place of gladness. The prairies stretch out on every side of us, taking a sun-bath under a sky of cobalt-blue, fading away, east and north and south, as far as the eye can see. And to the west there are the Rockies. Hour by hour, throughout the day, they change and brighten and darken and change again. One can see them, at the first peep of dawn, peaks of rose-pink merging into pearl and chalky white, darkening down to the timber-line of misted green and still mistier shadows. In the broad light of noon they are serried caps of snow streaked with sparkles of glacial ice and intensifying the blue of the sky above them, a flashing chain of pearls and diamonds, brilliant enough to make the eyes ache, majestic enough to touch the heart of man with humility. And when evening comes on the wine-glow once more creeps up over the white and a lowering sun splashes them with fantastic colors and throws gloomier blue-green shad-

ows between them, against a gigantic back-drop of Burgundy red and Roman gold, as the sun goes to bed. And they stand there in the paling light, old and timeless, and unchanging, reminding us how trivial are the ways of man.

For life goes on, serenely indifferent to our personal and private emotions. It goes on, and leaves scant time for even that day-dreaming when, as a rule, a young wife's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love. But I'm determined to do my part. I've helped Jamie and Hugh put our main-crop wheat-seed through the fanning-mill; I've played cowboy and taken part in rounding up our range cattle and bringing the spring calves in for branding, an operation which impressed my untutored eyes as singularly cruel; and I've materially assisted my lord-and-master in building a fence about a garden-plot which he'd already plowed and disked and harrowed for me. I've house-cleaned and set hens and been a Cook's guide to wandering goslings and raked up what is called our "yard" and painted the woodwork in our living-room and made two summer frocks for myself and continued to carry on in the matter of cooking and washing and scrubbing and churning and mending and ironing and bread-making and baking. For I have two hungry men to feed and it takes a power of contriving, I've found, to introduce novelty into our necessarily restricted prairie-life diet.

But I do what I have to without complaint. For I

know, all the while, that Jamie is working much harder than his lady sparrow from across the sea. He has oiled and repaired the windmill, which no longer moans and groans like a lost soul in Gehenna, and has finished up his outside plowing, and mended his worn-out harness and put his seed-drill in order and disked and harrowed up the last of his arable land into a fit and proper seed-bed, and broken a pair of colts and repaired his implements and fences. He goes forth, day by day, grimly and stolidly self-immured and returns to his roof-tree, and incidentally to his obediently docile wife, dust-covered and tired and hungry and strangely shut off from the rest of the world. The one thing that keeps him from desolation, I'm sure, is his wheat. He'd be pitiful, without that wheat, like an inedible oyster with its pearl carried away. And I've no right to be jealous of his hopes. For I've decided, no matter what happens or how troglodytic my days, that I will never be small-souled and sodden. Hugh, I fancy, suspects that I'm not very happy. He drops little gifts at my feet, as dumbly as Terry. Yesterday, in his blindness, he brought me home a copy of *The Sphere*, but with woman's unreasoning resentment against pleasures from which she is excluded I could only frown over its photographs of a lanky duchess on the North Berwick Links and a lankier midinette in a Lanvin dress of silver *lamé* and a tweedy group of overfed horse-lovers at the Curragh on Leger Day. Yet it's Hugh, when I come to think of it, who has

kept me from going native. He's a sort of human buffer between me and the general flintiness of Fate. And I'm glad to have him here with us, though there are times when two able-bodied men prowling about this sadly restricted abode can make a startled lady feel singularly like a goldfish. But there are other times when I feel rather like a vampire-bat, enclosing Hugh in my wings merely that I may feed on his flesh. For it's what we're getting from Hughie that is keeping our ship afloat, these lean and troubled days, that pays for our coffee and coal-oil and sugar and tea. And he really does much more than he ought. When he saw how thin our hand-towels had worn he bought yards and yards of huckaback towel-ing, with the casual request that I make them up for him, though he knew well enough they would hang above our common washbench. When he saw I'd descended to cotton stockings he promptly and indignantly bought me three pairs of sun-tan silk hose, which I now save for state occasions. He even brought home a few ounces of sweet-pea seed, given to him by one of his school-children, and together we planted a double trench of the same, on a waywardly cool evening when everything pointed toward a sharp frost before morning. When I voiced the fear we were committing them to the earth a trifle too early Hugh quietly assured me that sweet-peas were like human affections, thriving best after lying dormant and surviving drought only when deeply rooted.

Jamie, who paused in the gathering twilight to watch us as we worked, must have thought we were crazy, fussing muddy-fingered over nothing better than flower-seeds. For he, I remembered, had more momentous things on his mind. That afternoon, in fact, had been an epochal one for him. It was the day when he had proudly and finally planted his prize wheat-seed. And a trellis of flowering peas, naturally, was of small consequence beside a field of the best wheat Mother Earth could grow.

He took a grim sort of satisfaction, I could see, in drilling those precious nine sacks of grain into the waiting earth. They were at last safe in the lap of the gods. They'd been surrendered to the dark to await a more glorious resurrection. But their first night in their new bed, I felt, was a dolorously chilly one. And Jamie, I also felt, seemed a little forlorn without them. As he trudged silently off to the stable, in fact, he impressed me as such a lonely and solitary figure that I was prompted, when our garden work was completed, to slip out to the stable-yard, where I found him bolting a new point on his gang-plow. Far off across the prairie I could hear the bark of a farm-dog. And from a slough beyond our line-fence came the querulous call of a marsh-bird.

It sent a pang of lonesomeness through me and an absurd craving for companionship.

"Isn't it about time to call it a day?" I said as I stood beside my husband's stooping shoulder.

Jamie went stolidly on with his work.

"Only the dead," he said, as he tightened a nut on the shadowy iron arm before him, "have the right to rest."

"But you're working too hard, Jamie," I reminded him, wondering at the unexpected lump in my throat.

"Didn't you say you wanted to see me a success?" he challenged.

"But there are other things I want," I also reminded him.

"Well, those are the things I intend to get," proclaimed poor old purblind Jamie as he stood up and stared abstractedly about at an Egyptian blue sky where the first few stars were beginning to show.

"We don't," I ventured, "seem to be thinking of the same things."

He turned slowly about and stood staring down at me. And even in the half-light I could see how his face wore that blighted and embittered look one sees on men whose earlier years have been marked by long and desperate struggle.

"You're not getting much out of this, are you?" he finally said.

"I'm getting all I deserve," I acknowledged.

But he shook his head, in negation.

"That's the hellish part of marrying a clodhopper," he averred. "But some day it may be different."

I could afford to laugh at that. But I'm afraid there wasn't much mirth in it.

"There seems to be something missing," I found the courage to say.

"What?" he questioned.

And before I could answer a lonely calf bleated from the darkening corral for its mother.

"It's love," I asserted, wondering why so small a word should be so terribly hard to say.

"We haven't much time for the luxuries, have we?" said Jamie as he turned away for his lantern.

"We haven't, have we?" I agreed, forcing a laugh. For what's the use in being a mud lark, after all, if you can't in some way wring contentment out of your adversity?

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE police, so far, have failed to find Spike Forgan. And Bull McDoel also discreetly keeps his distance. But a few days ago, when I passed that cattle-king on the main street of Elk Crossing, he politely doffed his hat to me. And when I returned to Pavlova, after a frugal exchange of butter and eggs for much-needed groceries, I found reposing on my car seat a basket of California grapes, to which was attached a card saying: "From a friend and neighbor."

My first impulse was to dump the basket overboard. But, as I've already observed, life humbles us. What I actually did, after a moment or two of mixed feelings, was to tear up the card. And Jamie, when I returned to Journey's End, frowned silently down at that basket of odorous fruit. It seemed, of course, an example of wanton extravagance.

Yet Jamie, on the whole, is more patient with me than I deserve. I do what I can to help, but I continue to make mistakes that must exasperate him. The other day he gave me carrot-seed to plant in a dozen long rows in our garden plot. And I used up all my seed in the first half-row, planting it, in my blindness, more than twenty times too thick. Even Hugh, when he found out about that *faux pas*, solemnly shook his head and protested there was no tragedy

like the tragedy of being too lavish. And when I asked him what he meant by that he casually announced that women quite often gave too much.

"But that," I protested, "is what we were made for."

"Yet sometimes your carrot-seed runs out," he reminded me. He stood silent for a moment or two, watching Terry chewing on my darning-egg. "You know, I wish you'd go away for a week or two," he finally observed.

"Are you getting tired of me, Hughie?" I demanded, rather startled by what he had said.

"I couldn't tire of you in a thousand years, and you know it," averred Hugh as his eyes met mine.

And I was the first one to look away.

"Then you think Jamie is?" I questioned.

"I don't say that," answered Hugh. "But men can sometimes take too much for granted."

"You think he should get a guitar and yodel love-songs under my window?" I suggested, resenting an implication that didn't altogether add to my happiness.

"No, he'd never do that," admitted Hugh. "But you're a woman—and women have to be told."

"Told what?" I demanded.

"How much a man is in love with them."

And much to my surprise, I found myself launched on a vigorous defense of Jamie. The pioneer type, I pointed out, was never a vocal one. Men who are alone all day long on their land drift into the habit of

silence. They never stop work to sing you songs of Araby. They rely more on conduct than on conversation. And the flowery talkers, I affirmed, were seldom strong on action.

"But isn't there something missing?" persisted Hugh.

And, meeting his eye as steadily as I could, I told him that I was perfectly happy. Yet that question led me to an assessment of my surroundings. We were, I told myself, doing exactly what about twenty million other families were doing in America, trying to get a home and make a go of life. It was an old story, in one way, but its very hazards and uncertainties gave it the coloring of a great adventure. And if Jamie was bending every effort to give me the sort of life he felt I was entitled to, there was really chivalry at the root of his struggle. His one determination was to improve our fortunes, to better our lot in life. That, Hugh might contend, was a very American point of view. We are less tolerant, in the Old Country, of the ruthless go-getter, where to swank is so often regarded as bad form. But that was because, at Home, we were old and tired and satisfied to rest on past accomplishments. And there was a joy in work when work brought its immediate rewards. Lady Helen and the Carterets, I fancy, would weep with pity if they ever stood by and watched me as I grub-hoed the long vegetable rows in my garden-plot. But I've a liking for that kind of labor. And I get an absurd sort of

joy out of churning and shaping half a dozen rolls of yellow butter. I love to bake and lift six brown-crusted loaves from the oven. I love to see a line full of clean clothes whipping in the prairie wind. I've even learned how to chop kindling without swiping off a toe, and sometimes when I help about the stables the ammoniacal smell of the stalls is not altogether offensive to my nostrils. And there's no narcotic, I've found, like the work, indoor and out, about a prairie shack. I may not be swathed in eiderdown, but my muscles are firm and my body is pliant. I sleep like a log and eat like a pit-man. I've lost my English complexion, it's true, and my face and neck and arms are tanned to a butter-nut brown that would put a Devonshire gypsy to shame. I have to cut my own hair and rub buttermilk on my skin to keep from scaling like a garter-snake; and I find, after adjuring the use of lip-stick for half a year, that I no longer need that chemical substitute for a good blood-count.

Yet when I told Hugh there seemed to be nothing much that I was missing he didn't quite believe me.

"You'll be happier," he said not unkindly, "when children come along." Without knowing it, however, he sent a cloud across a perfectly good day.

"But that's a luxury we can't afford," I promptly told him. And I went back to my work, wondering why I should nurse a phantasmal heaviness about that little blood-pumping engine which is sometimes known as the seat of the emotions.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It's in the lonely life, I suppose, that the unexpected can prove so momentous. It stands up above the dead level of daily happenings as conspicuously as Elk Crossing's lone grain-elevator stands up above the prairie-line. And three letters, within the week, have brought three shocks to me.

The first was a dove-colored note, carried to our door by a stocky small boy on a stocky small bronco. And it was for Hugh, who colored perceptibly as he perused it. When he later announced, with too studied nonchalance, that he was going riding the next day with a girl from a neighboring ranch, I promptly smelled a rat. I smelled, in fact, a whole Hamelin army of rats, and fell to wondering if even my exceptional Hughie was to prove a disappointment to me.

The second and the third letters were from England, one from Lady Helen and the other from Uncle Gregory. Lady Helen's carried the news that she was on her way to Victoria with the Carterets, and as she hoped to be stopping off at Banff in two weeks' time, she suggested that I run up to that mountain resort and spend a few days with her, without realizing, of course, that Banff was considerably more than half the distance between London and Liverpool from my humble prairie abode.

Hugh, when he learned of the letter, openly observed that a week in Banff would set me up for the summer. And Jamie, after a solemn study of my face, agreed with him.

"That means," I said with prompt and feminine resentment, "that I'm not much use around here."

"We'd be miserable, of course," averred dependable old Hugh, "but we could carry on for a week or so."

"I've batched before," observed Jamie.

"And you might get Indian Nellie back," I maliciously suggested.

But Jamie dedicated himself to his own thoughts. And the question, for the time being, was tabled.

Uncle Gregory's letter announced Leslie Foraker's death in London, two weeks after his return from Biskra.

Leslie had been very unhappy out there, I gathered, and had crept back to England to die. And before dying, apparently, he had been giving some thought to the past. For Leslie, I was told, had left me a trifle over six hundred pounds, after all costs and inheritance taxes had been paid. Papers would be sent on to me in due time, the letter explained, but as it took an entire year to probate a will in England there would be considerable delay before this small but doubtlessly much-welcomed remittance could be sent out to me. And I couldn't help wondering, as I read his letter, if Uncle Gregory ever chanced to remember a certain June afternoon in London when, as the sun

went so peacefully down behind Putney, a storm had broken out in Leslie's chambers.

But time, I've found, has the trick of juggling with settled opinions. And life, after all, isn't so simple as it seems. The good comes tangled up with the bad. And we're not all black or all white, but an incongruous mixture of both. Leslie hadn't entirely forgotten me. He must even have cared for me a little. Yet that thought brought no elation with it. And even in the prospect of his six hundred pounds I could take little real joy. I found it hard, in fact, to read Uncle Gregory's letter to Jamie, who listened in silence. But when I looked up, I noticed my husband's face was a clouded one.

"Are you going to take that man's money?" he demanded.

"Not if you feel I shouldn't," I promptly explained. But, as my eye rested on the grim and gaunt figure in the sadly patched overalls, I couldn't help speculating on what six hundred pounds would mean to the Gilson family.

"That's for you to decide," announced Jamie in a voice edged with ice. Yet his interpretation of the situation, I felt, was more than ungenerous.

"I'm afraid we're rather helpless in the matter. And I suppose, in one way, it might help a little."

"Help whom?" demanded Jamie.

"Us," I retorted as I stared at a dish-towel made from a sun-bleached grain-sack.

"Not me," barked Jamie with a hand-sweep of repudiation that I found a trifle hard to swallow.

"Then me," I said with more of a tremor of indignation than I had intended.

And Jamie stood looking down at me with a remote and hostile eye.

"You've probably earned it," he was cruel enough to cry out.

I sat silent, doing what I could to cap the well of my anger. But I could feel a curtain of steel lower between us. And life, of a sudden, seemed pressing down on me a little too hard. I was, I realized, neither trusted nor understood. That old blind jealousy of my unknown past still swung like a naked sword-blade between us. And I was tired of eating crow. It might seem like withdrawal in the hour of trial, it might seem like retreat from the field before the battle was won: but I decided, that afternoon, on my visit to Lady Helen and my week at Banff.

And I told Jamie of my intentions.

Yet Jamie, three hours later, made me feel more than ever a traitor. For just at sunset he led me rather proudly out to his precious seed-plot. And as I stood before him I realized that, no matter how lean and straitened his days, life still held its moments of bigness for him. For there, tenderly and lovingly, he showed me, along the higher swells of dark soil, the first small shoots of his prize wheat.

They were there, thick enough to give a tincture of

verdure to the bald ground, little sword-blades of pale green brandished defiantly aloft against frost and drought and hail and rust.

"It's beautiful, Jamie," I said, thrilling with the thought of promise in that first growth of the year.

"I don't know why it is," observed my workaday Jamie, "but wheat-growers around here always plant their seed too thick. I do better, I find, when I sow thin."

"Does that also apply to your faith in people?" I challenged.

But Jamie, if he heard the question, ignored it as he stooped lower over the pale green sword-blades. And as I stood in the paling afterglow, alone with my thoughts, I felt sorry for that unkind thrust.

"It must make you happy, Jamie," I said by way of amendment, "to see that beautiful wheat coming back to you."

"I'll be happier," answered Jamie, "when it's safely cut and threshed."

He refused to be emotional over it. He suspected, I think, that to articulate any deeper feeling was in some way to cheapen it. Yet I knew, by the light in his veiled and solemn eyes, that he was as proud of that wheat as I was. It was like stooping over the cradle of his first-born. And he wasn't thinking of me, I could see as he stood there in the prolonging evening light, but of the little blades of green that would grow tall in the summer sun and bear their close-

packed heads of milky berries and drink moisture from the earth and sweetness from the light as they swayed in the wind and eventually became a yellow more precious than any yellow that ever glittered on a golden-headed woman. For a woman is only a woman, but a field of wheat, when it's the best wheat ever grown, stands something to cherish and guard and worship and pass on to a waiting world.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I STUCK to my guns on the matter of going to Banff. But I stood appalled, as I made ready for my visit with Lady Helen, by the things I needed. I was little better than a rag-bag. A house frock of faded print, freshly washed and ironed, might pass muster in a prairie shack but would not leave me a shining light in a hotel lounge. I needed a new hat. And even more I needed shoes and gloves and nighties and a traveling bag that didn't look as if it had come out of the Ark.

But more than everything else, I felt, my soul needed a dry shampoo.

So I refused to let that lack of clothes deter me. I went stoically about my preparations, mending and patching and pressing, even salvaging Hughie's gayest pair of silk pajamas, which were decidedly on their uppers, and refashioning them into rather oriental-looking sleeping-garments for myself. With my own hands I stitched together the broken seams in my English walking-shoes and from a worn-out riding gauntlet I got enough lining-leather to patch and make respectable my one remaining pair of gloves. Hugh insisted, at the last, that I should make use of his presentable but painfully heavy Gladstone bag of English pig-skin, together with a monogrammed toilet-set from which the unmistakably masculine utensils had been withdrawn.

Jamie, I noticed, gave little attention to these preparations. But he did not oppose them. He remained remote, even on my last day at the ranch, when I was so busy baking a seven-loaf batch of bread, a crock of doughnuts, and three raisin pies, to tide my sad-eyed hermits over their womanless week. He emulated the turtle and shut himself up in his shell, on our last night together, doing his best to ignore my movements as I folded and packed my things and questioned Hugh as to what a lone lady should do when she first steps into a New-World hotel. I began to feel, in a way, that I was making ready for a final departure, that I was following in the footsteps of Ibsen's Nora and leaving my doll's house of a shack for ever.

Jamie, the next morning, was equally silent during our drive in to Elk Crossing. He too must have nursed some shadow of my own feeling of finality. For he gulped a little, as the train pulled in, and startled me by taking me rather clumsily in his arms and kissing me.

"Good-by," he said, with a choke in his voice. And having said it, he turned away, as I've seen a child turn away when the first earth is thrown on a lowered coffin. He stood there, without moving, as I climbed aboard. He was still there as I peered from my car window and we went slithering out of the station-yard. He looked oddly desolate and forlorn on that bald and wind-swept platform. It was, I remembered, the first time we had been really separated since our marriage. And it made me feel like a deserter. If he'd called to

me, I'm afraid, I should have taken a swan-dive out of the car window and limped back to him. And as that last picture of him stayed with me, all the way to Calgary, I tried to tell myself that it was a terrible mistake, all things considered, to be so tragically dependent on any one man.

Or is it?

For the price of ecstasy, after all, is anguish. Tangled up with our capacity for love is a corresponding capacity for suffering. And it's only the woman with a dead soul, I claim, who irremediably loses out in this world.

But, once in Calgary, I forgot my self-communings. For I found that brisk and blithe-spirited foot-hill city rather go to my head. It placed me, at a stroke, on a competitive basis with other women. And if I had been vaguely satisfied with Joan Alicia Gilson as a lone rose of the prairie, I soon found myself, on those crowded city streets, an inadequately dressed clodhopper from the back townships. And, having become aware of my shabbiness, I counted over what remained of my money, after buying a single-fare ticket to Banff, and abandoned myself to an orgy of shopping. I lost my head. I bought a hat, a green felt cloche that swallowed up three good dollars, to say nothing of new shoes and gloves, and finally a green jersey jumper to match the new hat. It was madness, I knew, but I fell a victim, I suppose, to that craving for color and opulence which whimpers somewhere in the soul of

every woman. I had been starved for such things, without quite knowing it. The world had moved on and left me behind. And I needed the confidence which only respectable clothes could bring to a woman.

Yet my meeting with Lady Helen was in the nature of a let-down. So much train tumult, after the quietness of prairie life, made my head ache, and the stately big hotel in the midst of the mountains rather overawed me, and the horse-faced Miss Erskine, Lady Helen's companion who was really little more than a maid, stared a bit witheringly at my masculine-looking traveling-bag. Even my clothes, apparently, didn't meet with my hostess's approval, and she seemed shocked at my hands, and frowned over my sunburn, and ventured the opinion that farming was no calling for a lady of quality. She was kind—but she didn't understand. And I found, to my dismay, that we hadn't as much to talk about as I'd expected. I'd even grown a trifle careless, I was told, as to my manner of speech and my use of Americanisms.

Some of the things Lady Helen said about Canada, in fact, struck me as rather silly. And she was quite open in her hatred for Americans and their gum and grapefruit and overboiled tea and oversized trains. And I realized, for the second time in one day, that the world had indeed moved on and left me behind. I was so far in the rear, in fact, that the plenitude of towels in the big nickeled bathroom rather took my breath away and going up in a lift gave me a hollow feeling

just under the breast-bone, and having breakfast served in bed looked suspiciously like a moral delinquency. I no longer cared for golf, and was bored by motoring about the valley roads, and could stir up no enthusiasm at the prospect of visiting a buffalo park. The mountainous country all about me seemed lovely enough, after the flatness of the prairie, but I was homesick. A little worm of loneliness was gnawing at the rose of my temporary opulence. I kept wondering what Jamie was doing, and why he had kissed me, and how much he was missing me, and if he was cooking himself the right kind of meals. I had, I remembered, even grown away from my own people. Everything seemed very English, at Banff, with English tourists strolling along the Swisslike streets and English voices all about me at the tea-hour in the lounge. But, oddly enough, I no longer felt that I was one of them. They seemed like foreigners to me. And to them, I suppose, I seemed like a weather-beaten and badly dressed monstrosity from the back woods.

Lady Helen, in fact, talked impersonally yet pointedly about the folly of letting oneself go, when one was still young and might possibly still make oneself passably attractive, and insisted on handing over to me a correcting quantity of silk stockings and undies and a rose-pink peignoir and a black chiffon dinner-gown which, when reduced to the proper dimensions, would surely prove a surprise to Billiken and Buckshot and the denizens of the calf-pen. But I accepted that

finery, with a grim sort of meekness, and even accepted Lady Helen's suggestion that a bleaching-mask wouldn't be a bad sort of investment. For I learned at least one thing from my visit to Banff. Jamie may say that rouge isn't honest and he may dislike the taste of lip-stick, but men, apparently, still judge a woman by her outward appearance. And from that hour forward, I decided, I was going to do better by myself and not grow into a frump without the power to hold the man of her heart. I'd been a bit careless, I realized, in the matter of clothes—and no woman, I learned in those few days of secret misery, should be that. In trying to be efficient I'd forgotten how to be attractive. And that, perhaps, was why Jamie's grab-bag wife had lost her glamour for him.

But, glum and gaunt as he was, I wanted to be with him. He was my mate. And I missed him. At the beginning of my third day at Banff, in fact, I startled Lady Helen by announcing that instead of going on to Lake Louise with her I was going home. When I went determinedly down to the office to inquire about trains I found, to my horror, that I hadn't enough money to carry me back to Elk Crossing. I was shuddering at the thought of having to beg or borrow ten shillings from an openly indignant hostess, when a heavy but not unfriendly voice sounded across my shoulder.

"Well, stranger, what're *you* doing in these parts?"

I turned and found myself face to face with Bull

McDoel. And the discovery didn't add to my happiness. But my coolness threw no cloud over the bland-eyed man of cattle.

"Where are you heading for?" he asked with a head-nod toward my time-table.

"I'm going back to Elk Crossing," I quietly informed him.

"When?" he asked as he looked at his watch.

"As soon as I can get away."

"Then why bother about trains," he suggested, "when I can motor you there?"

I met his steady gaze with one quite as steady. It was, in a way, a solution of my problem. And life, I'd learned, was largely a matter of give and take, where friends were often exacting and enemies were sometimes generous. Yet I hesitated.

"Are you afraid of me?" asked McDoel, with a small and mordant laugh.

"Not in the least," I assured him. What held me back, I knew, was the thought of Jamie's hatred for the man. But I was, after all, free, white and twenty-one. And once at Elk Crossing I could phone out to the Wilmots', who could send a message on to Journey's End and have Hugh drive in for me.

"I'm leaving in half an hour," explained McDoel. "And we'll have a meat packer by the name of Wimberly along with us."

The presence of Mr. Wimberly seemed to decide the issue. And when I told McDoel that I'd be glad to ride

back with him he merely said "Applesauce!"—which appears to be American slang for protestations with a coloring of insincerity.

It was two good hours, however, before the flashing big car purred out under the stone archway of the Banff hotel, with the somnolent and indifferent-eyed Mr. Wimberly alone in the back seat and me in the driver's seat beside my triumphant enemy, while a somewhat puzzled Lady Helen watched us depart in a restricted but significant cloud of dust. We threaded our way along a beautiful winding road past verdant valleys and rocky cliffs and snow-clad mountain-peaks bathed in a crystal-clear wash of light. We went like the wind, droning down long slopes and swinging about horseshoe curves and still again climbing to dizzy heights from which the pines on the lower valley-slopes looked no bigger than pointed nine-pins on a playroom floor. And I should have been happy. But always, just under my floating ribs, was a feeling of disquiet shot through with a ghostlier feeling of guilt.

That feeling of disquiet increased, in fact, when I found we were dropping our packing-house friend at Calgary. But I had no intention of shivering like a white mouse just because I saw myself in an open car with a rather taurine type of man whom my husband happened to hate.

"It's nicer being alone," observed the bland-eyed McDoel as we left Calgary behind us. The implication was obvious. But I ignored it.

"Have you ever found out what became of Spike Forgan?" I quietly inquired.

That took the wind out of his sails. The rubicund big face hardened, for a moment, and then relaxed into a one-sided smile.

"I guess Spike knew he couldn't go Jesse James around here without paying for it," explained my companion, with a shrug. "So he's naturally given us all a wide berth."

"Why," I determinedly questioned, "do you suppose he wanted to steal my husband's prize wheat?"

Still again Bull McDoel sat silent for a moment or two. And still again his silence ended in a slightly evasive smile.

"Big Jim's got a prize or two," he ventured, "that we'd all like to steal."

I met and held the gaze of my Casanova of the cattle-range.

"You've said that before," I reminded him. "And you haven't answered my question."

McDoel's laugh, brief as it was, struck me as a protective one.

"Since you're so hell-bent for facts, I'll tell you something," he finally said. "That bird you're living with has a hair-trigger temper. A year ago Spike and him had a little argument about some cattlebrands. Before it was through Spike found himself laid up for a week with a broken jaw. And there was another wallop I guess Spike kind o' remembers." The heavy

shoulders lifted in a shrug. "But what's the use of digging up those old ructions? Wouldn't it be more sensible for us two to swing down one of these side-trails and just keep on riding?"

"I'm afraid not," I averred, conscious of the nestling movement with which the taurine big body swayed and settled a little closer to me.

"Then how about supper at Scotty's Road-House?" he blandly suggested.

"I'm having supper this evening with my husband," I asserted, resisting an impulse to emulate Aggie Hathaway and inform the pachydermous wooer at my side that if he expected to find me a rural cowslip who'd tremble like an aspen leaf at a touch from a prairie Lothario, he was in for the surprise of his life.

"S'posing I decide different?" challenged McDoel.

And I could see the heavy rubicund jaw harden a little. I looked at him, with a pretense of being mildly amused. I even laughed aloud.

"But you won't," I announced, grateful for the glimpse of Elk Crossing's elevator as it loomed ahead of us. "And I'll be obliged if you'll drop me at the Central Drug-Store."

We swayed on for half a mile before my companion spoke again.

"People who know me," he proclaimed, "usually realize I get what I go after."

"We've made wonderful time, haven't we?" I evaded as we swung into the dustier main street of the Cross-

ing. I even smiled as I said it, for I knew that my hour of ordeal was over. I felt, in fact, like a troubled flier edging down to earth.

But that smile died on my face. For another car, turning out of Salmon's lumber-yard, a muddy and dust-covered car with a litter of shingle-bundles on its back seat, rattled close up beside us and cut malignantly in across our path, where it stopped, blocking our way. That obstructing car, I saw, was Pavlova. And the man stepping down from its driver's seat was my Jamie.

He strode over to where I sat, with my blood chilling at the black rage that glowed in his eyes.

"What are you doing in that car?" he demanded, intent and lowtoned and with a look of hate that horrified me.

"Merely coming home," I answered, trying to keep a quiver out of my voice.

"Home?" he cried, his hands shaking. "Have you one?"

"Haven't I?" I questioned, my own voice oddly hardened.

But he declined to answer that challenge.

"Where have you been?" he asked, his tanned face almost the color of old cheese.

"I've been at Banff," I said.

"How do I know that?"

"You'll have to take my word for it, I'm afraid," was my deliberated reply.

Jamie's eyes, as they went on to the silent McDoel, narrowed menacingly.

"Then why are you riding with that wheat-thief?" he demanded.

"He at least brought me safely here," I retorted.

"Am I supposed to thank him for that?" Jamie was cruel enough to bark out at me.

"He can still take me back again," I cried, surrendering to my own tide of anger.

But Jamie ignored that ultimatum.

"Get out of that car," he commanded.

I looked at him, for a moment, without moving. But I knew he was in no mood for hesitations. So I meekly reached for my bag and obeyed him. And I was conscious, as Jamie threw in his worn and clashing gears, of McDoel sitting back in his thick-cushioned seat and impassively lighting a cigar.

I said nothing, until we were in the open country again. Then I looked at my husband, staring at him as though I were seeing him from a great distance. This was the man, I remembered, I'd been homesick for, the man I'd decided, in my desolation of soul, to be more patient and thoughtful and tender with. And he was carrying me home like a collie-owner taking back a sheep-killer caught in the act.

"You're not being very kind," I said.

"You seem to 've had kindness enough for the whole family," answered Jamie as he yanked a wayward Pavlova back into the trail.

"That's how you value me!" I cried, feeling terribly alone in the world, for all my feeble-hearted parade of defiance.

"That's what you pay for marrying a woman you know nothing about," retorted the man who claimed to be my husband.

"And it's what I pay," I said, swallowing hard, "for trying to live with a man who doesn't believe in me."

"I've waited for the chance," affirmed my gray-lipped Jamie, "but you've never given it to me." And his foot went savagely down on the accelerator, exactly as though it was a good-for-nothing Better-Half under his boot-heel.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

COLERIDGE was right. It's simply hell to quarrel with somebody you care for. And it's not pleasant living with a man whose iciness can take the warmth out of your heart as promptly as a Scotch mist can take the heat out of sunlight.

Not that Jamie and I are at daggers drawn. He is finally persuaded, I think, that my Banff visit was something more than a herring-scent across the trail of duplicity. And we've arrived at a sort of armistice, in which we are coldly polite to each other. I even face my daily rounds with a fine pretense of cheerfulness, for no man, I fancy, would care to live long with a sour-faced woman. But there's a wound in my heart that refuses to heal. And yesterday Jamie rather stiffly apologized when he walked into my room and found me in nothing more than a slip.

It may be winter in my heart, but it's most assuredly summer outside, with long days of sunlight and little flat-bottomed clouds floating like dabs of fleece across a wide-flung sky of brooding blue. My carrot rows have come up as thick as grass and my sweet-peas are in bud. Jamie keeps saying we're in need of rain, but his wheat has grown prodigiously, turning a darker and darker green as it increases in height. It's tall enough now to ripple and waver in the wind and I never tire of

watching it as it darkens and brightens and darkens again with every ruffling breeze.

Hugh, I think, suffers most from the tension that hangs over this self-frustrating little household. He does what he can to make life endurable. But even with him there has grown up a thin and ghostly sense of remoteness. For Hugh, I find, has on several occasions gone riding with that girl from Ontario who answers to the name of Nannie Denholm and is, I understand, "dude-ranching" with the Delaneys, just beyond Grover's Creek. And the other day, when Hughie rather hesitatingly asked if he might bring his new friend over to tea and rather fussily decorated the living-room table with prairie flowers and trekked all the way to Elk Crossing for lady-fingers and apricot-jam, to say nothing of a new sugar-bowl and cream-pitcher, I dutifully put on my best bib and tucker and received the ardent-eyed Nannie, who, with her lithographic blue eyes first made me think of a picture post-card of the Bay of Naples, and then with her shy audacities and her bird-like alertness of body made me think of a wood-thrush.

Jamie, who was busy with a sick horse, could not be with us. But we had a pleasant enough hour together, even though Hugh, for all his guardedness, impressed me as a trifle possessive, while the ardent color that came and went in the girl's face kept reminding me that I was an old and weather-beaten wife. I could see, as plain as print, that she was head over heels in

love with Hughie. I could see their glances meet and lock, and the difficulty they experienced in disentangling them again. And I couldn't help feeling, as I sat once more alone in the shack, the shack that seemed so much emptier than ever before, that something warm and glamorous had slipped out of my life.

"She's top-hole, Hughie," I could truthfully enough say when Hugh came back into the quiet room.

He surprised me by taking my hand and holding it while his troubled eyes studied my face.

"You're both top-hole," he quietly affirmed. "And I want you to like her."

"Do *you*?" I asked, trying to fight down the foolish conviction that I was in some way losing him.

"Yes, I like her," acknowledged Hugh, with what I accepted as an Anglican resort to under-statement, "but it's tangled up with a feeling of disloyalty."

"To whom?" I asked, a little puzzled by the chatoyant light in his eyes.

"To you," he answered, without releasing my hand. "I suppose it oughtn't to be said, but I've always been in love with you, Jo-Jo. No, don't stop me. It was that way for years, I suppose, before I even understood it. And it's that way now. And I think it always will be. But I know it's no use. You're in love with another man. You're——"

"But I'm afraid he's not in love with me," I interrupted.

And, as much to Hugh's surprise as my own, a tear or two trickled slowly down my nose.

"You may be wrong there," warned Hugh, with a hand on my foolishly shaking shoulder. "Whether it's justified or not, he hates that man McDoel. And you hurt him, of course, when you rode home from Banff with that bounder."

"But what harm did it do?" I demanded.

And Hugh, I noticed, was not above smiling at my indignation.

"It seems to have put a strain on the home-circle that's not leaving either of you very happy," averred Hugh. "And you're both too proud to eat crow."

"But if you care for a woman," I contended, "you should bank on her to the bitter end. You believe in me, don't you, Hugh?"

"Of course," was Hugh's prompt reply. "But I happen to know you."

"Doesn't Jamie?" I asked. "The man I'm mated to?"

"But I've known you for twenty years," explained Hugh, "and he's known you eight or nine months. And the two of you stand for different types. You're voluble and impulsive. He's strong-willed and inarticulate. He wants to bank on you, as you express it, but he doesn't know your breed. He's a son of the soil, and he's lived alone too much. That type of man not only finds it hard to put his deeper feelings into words, but, as you yourself once acknowledged, he also sus-

pects they are in some way cheapened by being talked about. What's more, he's terribly afraid of being a failure. That makes him work too hard. Yet all the time, remember, it's for you he's working."

"But a woman wants words," I contended, knowing my cry was a foolish one even as I uttered it.

And Hugh smiled at me rather ruefully.

"Well, I'm afraid your Jamie will seldom say beautiful things," affirmed my knight who was failing me. "You'll have to be satisfied when you see him doing beautiful things."

That made me think of Jamie's prize grain.

"Then I wish he'd give me half the thought," I objected, "that he gives to his wheat."

"He does, Jo-Jo, only you don't always know about it. For instance, nearly every night, last month, he was out working in that tool-shed of his, working by lantern-light. You imagined, I suppose, it was to escape your meekly accusing eyes. But I'd happened to tell him that your birthday, not inappropriately, came on the fourth of July, the same being Independence Day. And he knew you'd always wanted a dressing-table. So he smuggled in timber and three slabs of plate mirror and with his own hands started to build you a three-panel contraption where you could sit in state and see how beautiful you were. And I know what I'm talking about, for around the main mirror-frame he's started to carve by hand that sentence of Li Po's from *Messer Marco Polo*. 'There is beauty in a

running horse and beauty in a running stream but there is no beauty like the beauty of a young woman and she letting down her hair.' And if that isn't the outcry of a lonely and love-hungry mortal, I'll eat my hat."

I backed up and dropped into a chair, feeling about as tottery as a new-born calf being over-vigorously licked by its mother.

"Oh, Hughie," I cried, "you shouldn't have told me."

"It was a secret, of course," acknowledged Hugh, "but there are some secrets that are best known."

I sat silent for what seemed a very long time.

"What am I to do, Hugh?" I asked in my helplessness.

"Be good to him," answered Hugh. "For goodness never seems to be wasted."

And perhaps it never is. But while Hugh and I were holding converse on eternal verities the ever-restless Terry had been having the time of his life. He'd punished me for disregarding the day of rest and washing out my one respectable pair of woolen blankets by leaping at their swaying ends as they swung and flapped on my clothesline. His sharp young teeth, in fact, had left a fine old fringe of tatters and shreds where a straight line of wool should have been. And I thought it expedient, all things considered, to have them folded up and out of sight before my stern-eyed Jamie strode back to the shack.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

I, WHO once pursued happiness about as frenziedly as Terry pursues prairie gophers, am not proving much of a success in my mud-lark rôle. Life seems all wrong. And I've a sense of waiting for something. What it is, or whether it's good or evil, I can't quite determine. But I remain merely an "extra" in the accelerating drama about me.

Yesterday was one of those white-hot prairie days that dry your skin and make your eyes ache and set you to dreaming about tree-shadowed rivers and long green Cornish combers breaking on wave-swept sand. And Jamie, as usual, has been worrying about his wheat. He even reminded me of a caged panther, as he prowled about after supper, from fence-line to fence-line, studying the sky, staring at my parched garden, and listening to the lowing of his equally restive cattle.

But, about an hour after sunset, there was a growl of thunder out of the southwest, followed by a sweep of cooler wind. Those thunder-growls came closer and died away and started up again a little while after I'd gone to bed, as limp and wilted as Jamie's wheat from the long day's heat. When I woke up, about midnight, and most unmistakably heard the lyric patter of rain-drops on the shack-roof, I felt as though that falling rain were washing some slow accumula-

tion of dust from my soul. It sounded like dancing feet. It was such music to my ears, as it came heavier and heavier, that I slipped out of bed, ostensibly to set two tubs under the back eaves, to catch enough rain-water for my next week's washing, but actually to feel the cooling pelt of water once more against my heat-wearied body. I remembered, in feeling those falling drops on my nightie-clad shoulders, that rain was the renewer of the world, that, like laughter, it could make life over for anxious-minded mortals. And I felt young again.

Then, as I dodged back under cover, I all but bumped into Jamie, standing silent and ghost-like in the shack door.

"Oh, Jamie, it's raining," I cried out in my foolish relief.

"So I see," announced Jamie. And a caustic note in his voice intimated that he was quite conscious of a fact already clearly observed.

"It'll help your wheat," I reminded him.

"It'll help everything," he agreed. He stood staring out through the darkness. "I was afraid of hail," he acknowledged, with an audible sigh of relief.

And I remembered that his beloved grain had been rescued from ruin. The most important thing in his life had been delivered from peril. During a lull in the rain I could even sniff a vague aroma from that mistress of his, a soft and earthy and seminal smell from the sleeping acres of green that stirred and swayed

voluptuously in the humid darkness. It made me feel lonely, and a little envious. I shivered, without knowing I was doing it, as I groped my way to my bald little cubby-hole of a bedroom. But as I lay waiting for some shadow of warmth to come back to my rain-chilled body, I remembered for the second time that Jamie had entirely forgotten my birthday. His intentions had been good, but wheat-seed, apparently, can prove as effective an opiate as poppy-seed. And that little altar of vanity in the form of a three-paneled dressing-table, so carefully fashioned and carved, still reposed out in the tool-shed, cheek-by-jowl with the necessary harmless grindstone. . . .

But Time, I realize, disregards our trivial heart-aches. And a little sand in an hour-glass can cut deeper than a great sword. School has closed for the summer, and Hugh is now helping Jamie with his hay-ing. Nannie Denholm rides over, occasionally, and has a noon-day lunch with us out on the open range. My thick-headed old Jamie, in fact, has just awakened to the meaning of Nannie's shadow across our door-sill. And he doesn't entirely disapprove of the arrangement.

"It looks as though you were going to lose your Hugh," he observed after one of our slough-side meals.

"Are you sorry?" I asked as I disregarded the possessive pronoun and gathered up my dishes.

"What difference would it make?" he countered as his gaze rested on the happy pair wandering off be-

tween the scrub-willow. Then, obviously piqued by the envious light in my eye, he proclaimed that Hugh should make a pretty successful lover, being always so able to express himself. And as I rode home across the sunlit prairie I couldn't help wondering why some men should have to shelter themselves behind a coat of harshness, which they take off only now and then as a tired knight doffs his mail-armor. I also wondered why women, to keep out the cold, had to bank their heart with patience, just as Jamie banks our winter shack with stable-manure.

But my lord-and-master, I'm afraid, has troubles enough to keep him preoccupied. For only yesterday morning he made a strange discovery. He found a gap cut in the barb-wire fence between our farther wheat-field and the grazing-land where he keeps his summer cattle. It was merely luck, blind luck, that they hadn't stumbled on that inviting open doorway in the barbed strands of metal that kept them where they belonged. If they had, besides rampaging ruinously through Jamie's standing grain, they would probably have died from over-gorging on such over-luscious green feed.

The fence was soon repaired, and Jamie said little about it. But I could see that he was worried. He mulled over the ground for foot-prints, quartered back and forth like a beagle, and even followed up an abortive trail or two. Then he finally went careening off to Elk Crossing. What he did there remained unknown

to me, but from Hugh I. later learned of his stumbling on an unconfirmed rumor that Spike Forgan had been seen on the open range, half-way between the McDoel ranch and Graveyard Coulee.

That rumor, of course, could mean little or much. But it disturbed me to see Jamie, after his return, so quietly and grimly going over his firearms, cleaning and oiling and reloading them and even giving attention to an ugly and short-barreled revolver that was new to me. It seemed to throw a shadow once more over our otherwise peaceful acres. It suggested a threat of violence, of lawless and unpredictable combats. And Jamie, I noticed, watched his wheat with a jealous eye. Sometimes in the night he would slip out in the darkness and stay away for an hour or two. And it seemed like an added strain imposed on a spirit already too tense with anxiety.

Sometimes, in fact, that nocturnal restlessness of his impressed me as foolish. It seemed to imply an over-tensioned state of nerves in which the true perspective of things had got twisted. For we lived in a land of law and order. And we were confronted by bigger issues than the thought of a shadowy prowler about the fringes of our fields of toil. We had, before everything else, a bumper crop to harvest.

For the wheat itself, as the long hot days went by, basked serenely in the flat sunlight and whispered peacefully with every changing breeze. I never tired of watching it. I even saw its dark thrifty green take

on a lighter shade, along the higher stretches of ground, though the darker green lingered longer in the lower places where moisture was more plentiful.

The days have been hot and dry again, but Jamie seems undisturbed by this, proclaiming that there is enough moisture to carry him through. The one thing he is afraid of, apparently, is hail; and day by day he studies the horizon and looks for wind-clouds and makes note of the evening temperature and methodically marks off another numeral on the little calendar above his work-desk. And it won't be long now before harvest is upon us. For I have seen Jamie's grain grow paler and paler, until the nearer and earlier field just beyond my kitchen-garden has turned almost to a creamy shade. And the creamy shade is slowly turning to a yellow, a slowly deepening yellow that seems to catch the color from the perpetual sunlight in which it is bathed. Here and there, in fact, I can see a hint of gold in that wavering sea where the great heads are heavy with milk. As that milk turns to sugar, I know, the gold will become more burnished and brilliant. But always, I realize, it has been beautiful to the eye, with its every shade and tint a lovely one, from the delicate pale green of the newly sprouted blades to the full gold of the tall and stately stalks that sway and bend and whisper together with every changing breeze. Sometimes, just skimming along the floor-like surface of pale gold, I can see a huge hawk go like a drifting sail, pioneering along in search of

rodents in the depth of that whispering forest of stalks. And sometimes I can see the dark shadow of a cloud, clear-cut as an island in motion, drift slowly across that sea of whispering yellow, taking the shimmer out of the plumed heads, intensifying the glow of the Roman gold just beyond its floating fringes of shadow. And now that the cropped pasture-land looks so parched and pallid, and even the roadside growth seems so stunted and faded, I can understand why one's eye instinctively turns to the wheat-fields. They lie before one so opulent and regal, so valiant and full of promise, so epic in their immensity. They are the world's bread, waiting to be garnered. And there is a touch of glory, no matter how meager our days of toil may seem, in taking part in that movement. Jamie may not wear his heart on his sleeve and slip Rupert Brooke love-sonnets under my door; but, in a way entirely his own, he is proving himself a poet. And if frost should come along and freeze the milk in those swelling kernels of grain I should refuse to believe in God. Or if hail should beat malignantly down from His heavens, and flail my Jamie's crop to pieces, I should simply curl up and die.

For Jamie has troubles enough as it is. He looks daily for rust, but as yet has found none. And he has binder-twine to buy. And he will need help, when the rush comes, but no matter how thick the idlers may crowd earth's cities of hunger, out here where their bread of life comes from and the hum of the binders

is creeping northward day by day there is not an able-bodied man to be hired or lured by love or money into our fields. So, being a grain-rustler's wife, I shall put on dungarees, and leave my house and garden to take care of themselves, and go out in the fields and help him harvest his wheat.

When I told Hugh of these intentions he rewarded me with a cousinly glance of approval.

"You're a good egg, Jo-Jo," he proclaimed as he passed his cup for a second ration of coffee.

"I may be a good egg," I said as I watched Jamie going somberly out to his morning's work, "but I've been in so much hot water that I begin to feel hard-boiled."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

IT CONTINUES hot and dry, but Jamie still claims we have moisture enough to carry us through. And harvest-time draws closer. All I can see, to the south and east of us, is wheat, waving wheat, rippling wheat, an ever-changing ocean of wheat. For these fields, after England, look immeasurably big to me. Yet our ranch is reckoned a small one, so small, in fact, we can't think of using a "combine." Instead, we'll use what at home is called a "string-binder," hauled by Jamie's dependable old tractor. And I'm to be a helper in the harvest-work.

So I don khaki, every morning now, and as soon as I'm free of my shack-work fare forth to do what I can for my over-driven husband. Yesterday I turned the harmless necessary grindstone while Jamie sharpened the sickle-bar for his binder, though the aforesaid grindstone, I observed, was first rather shamefacedly lifted out into the open, to the end, obviously, that the shadow of an unfinished dressing-table might not fall across the path of a certain over-inquisitive lady-navvy. And to-day I took a lesson in mechanics, for it's decided, when the grand rush comes, that I'm to mount the binder-seat and manage that monster of steel while Jamie drives the tractor. But there are so many levers and rods and wheels and pedals that the thing rather

frightens me. And I begin to realize how husbandry has changed since our ancestors garnered their pittance of grain with little hand-sickles of flint and bronze.

To-day it's a gigantic drama frenziedly enacted on a gigantic stage. And the thrill of the thing has a trick of getting into your blood. More and more I can understand why Jamie, on getting up from his midday meal, can move so dreamily to the door and stand staring out over his yellowing acres of grainland, whispering and wavering like an uneasy sea in the flat white heat of noon. I begin to know, now, how he feels when he stops on his weary way in to supper and studies the deepening gold of his prize-wheat plot where the maturing stalks and the heavy plumed heads rustle and bow and whisper together. For it's far from child's play, this battling for the stuff that feeds the world. There's bigness in it. And there's beauty in it, and pride, and an engrossing sense of power. And I'm glad to be part of it, even though the open sun has brought a runaway of turkey-egg freckles across my nose and I look rather like an undersized engine-wiper in my dusty and oil-stained overalls. But Jamie's eye, I notice, never dwells long on my diminishing curves. And Hugh blinks less and less disapprovingly at my open-fronted shirt. Outside in our dooryard, which has no trees and no shrubbery, thoughtful old Hughie has set me up a humble little *baldacchino*, made from an old binder-carrier stretched between four posts,

where, presumably, I can sit in the shade at my ease. But I seldom recline under that canopy of weather-stained canvas. Last Sunday, however, during the heat of high noon, Jamie, on his way out to salt his cattle, joined me there long enough to pack and light his pipe.

"Feel the heat?" he asked rather brusquely, after a sidelong glance at my face.

"A little," I acknowledged, "but I know it's good for your wheat!" And I wondered why he winced.

"Ever homesick for England?" he questioned, still with the same defensive brusqueness.

"Why?" I countered, puzzled by that unexpected query.

"Because I'm counting on having you go home for the Christmas holidays," Jamie startled me by saying.

"Go home?" I echoed, none too joyfully.

"It's what your high-rollers out here do most every year, just as my people, when they can afford it, slip down to California."

"But we're not high-rollers," I reminded him when I had digested my shock.

"Well, we may be," he proclaimed with a morose sort of pride as his eye turned approvingly to the yellow quadrangle where his prize wheat drank the sun that streamed down from the unbroken blue dome of heaven.

"No, Jamie," I said when I was able to speak with the required composure, "I'm not asking for any such

holiday or any such sacrifice. For I know it would be a sacrifice. And I wouldn't go home to England if the Lord-Mayor of London sent me a free ticket."

The cavernous brown eyes, I knew, were studying my slightly averted face.

"I don't seem to understand you," he said, his frown deepening.

"No, I don't think you do," I quietly admitted.

He stood, for a moment, silent and ill at ease.

"I guess I'm not much good," he finally admitted, "at understanding women."

"Have you ever tried?" I asked, doing my best to swallow the lump that had come into my throat.

But Jamie, apparently, didn't know what I was driving at. He merely stood there, awkward and perplexed, until his joyless glance happened to wander on to his dreaming quadrangle of gold. Then his eye slowly softened.

"She's sure ripening up," he said, obviously feeling for some escape from the emotional to the actual.

Yet, when I was alone again, I couldn't altogether blame him for that preoccupation with his crop. It's his one big note in the chorus of life. It endures no rivalry. And it purges away the smaller worries. I myself, in fact, seem to have been tarred by the same brush. This wheat obsession, apparently, has extended its spell over me. For to-day when I spotted a stranger strolling about the stable-yard, and then circling the corral, I promptly saw red. Jamie, I remembered, had

teamed in to town after binder-twine and supplies. And I, for the time being, was the custodian of that crop.

So when I observed this stranger climb the fence and invade our field of prize wheat, where he stood studying the thick-clustered heads, I promptly possessed myself of Jamie's rifle and marched out toward the trespasser. I could feel, as I went, little feral tingles pirouetting up and down my spine, and my voice was no gentle one as I accosted that intruder and demanded his business.

It wasn't until he turned, with a broad smile at my belligerency, that I recognized him as the seed-buyer named Crummer.

"Just having a look at this wheat o' yours, lady," he suavely informed me. "And it's sure worth looking at."

But my suspicions were by no means allayed. And my rifle was still well in front of me.

"What right have you in this field?" I demanded.

"None at all, I guess," conceded the intruder. "But I can't see as there's any harm done."

"There will be, if you're not off this land in two minutes' time," I announced with what seemed to impress him as a somewhat absurd parade of ferocity. For he laughed again, studying me with rather a quizzical eye. Then he slowly swung back across the barbed-wire fence.

"All right, little fire-eater," he proclaimed. "I'm

on my way. But you mustn't fool around with fire-arms like that, young lady. You might get yourself hurt. And then your husband wouldn't want to talk business with me after this seed-grain goes through a separator."

"He has no wish to talk business with you," I affirmed.

"We'll see about that later," said my visitor as he climbed into his car. But I stood watching him, with my rifle still in my hands, until he turned into the open trail and disappeared in a derisive cloud of dust.

Jamie, on his return home, laughed dourly, when I told him of that encounter, and declared that I was doing pretty well for a rector's daughter. He also observed, when I asked why that seed-man should be so interested in his wheat, something about the world wearing a path to your door if you happened to be making the right sort of mouse-trap. But I couldn't quite see what he was getting at.

Chapter Thirty

HARVEST is here.

The stage is set for the final act. The big moment in this bread-winner's drama is about to arrive. The racers are entering the home-stretch and a season of toil is ripening into fulfilment. And, in the midst of tumult and hurry and the clang and rattle of machinery, I'm doing what I can to help.

For Jamie needs all the help he can get. It's very dry, and there's always danger, in dry weather, of grain shelling as it stands. So he's busy cutting his prize wheat, which, as he foretold, was far and away the earliest to ripen. Not a kernel of that crop must be lost. So Jamie himself is doing the cutting, after first scything a swath, wide enough for a three-horse team to pass, entirely around that fenced-in quadrangle. As he swings about the field, high on the seat of his self-binder, he reminds me of a king on his throne. And Diana in her starry chariot of gold could scarcely hold a candle to him. But there's nothing very celestial, I'm afraid, about his conduct. For his crop's so heavy he's having trouble in handling it. Hugh and I follow the binder, along the yellow stubble streaked with the marks of the great bull-wheel, gathering up the sheaves dropped by the carrier and standing them together in stooks. It's not easy work, but

I keep at it until I'm ready to drop. Then, having gathered my breath, I hurry back to my sadly neglected shack and prepare food for my two tired and dusty field-workers.

Jamie, I can see, is dumbly satisfied with that prize wheat of his. He says little about it, but I can detect a contented sort of pride in his eye as he studies those stooks of heavy gold. He has even carried one huge sheaf in to the living-room, where it stands enthroned in his home-made armchair. I could overlook the anxiety with which he counted the kernels in several heads, but when he bends so lovingly over that sheaf of gold, and touches it with such triumphant tenderness, I still feel a ghostly sort of jealousy shoot through my tired body. It's beautiful to him, of course, but no woman likes to feel that something else is the Big Noise about her home. And I can't go out and turn cart-wheels just because my kulak husband has invented a new kind of wheat.

But Jamie, I imagine, is in need of all the consolation he can get out of it. He's still harried and worried and over-worked, and he's getting as lean as a kite. And we're terribly short-handed. Lanky Bolton has been over to help us, for a half-day, but Lanky, like the rest of the men in this neighborhood, is needed on the home acres just now. So I've been stooking oversized grain-sheaves until my back aches and my wrists are raw and the long lines of golden mounds seem to waver in the sunlight. Yet I do it without

complaining. For I know, as I race after the clang and clatter of the binder delivering its bound wealth on the yellow stubble, that there's a note of nobility in such work.

But we still have our main crop to take care of. And since that's to be done by tractor, with Jamie hauling the binder behind him, he has once more shown me how the foot-pedal dumps the bundle-carrier, and how one lever tilts the binder-frame so the sickle-bar will not miss the grain in depressions and hollows, and how another shifts the knotter so that long or short grain may still be bound in the middle, and how still another raises and lowers the reel to make it reach a grain-stand of varying height.

And, trying to remember all this, I clambered over grease-covered gears and chains and climbed into the driver's seat, which Jamie had prudently padded with an old sugar-bag stuffed with sweet-grass. Then Jamie, with a final glance about the binder, left me enthroned alone there and mounted his tractor-seat.

I heard the sudden bark of the tractor's exhaust and felt my binder lurch into action. With a clattering of drive-chains, a grind of gears, a pulsing click of sickle-bar, I got under way, gripping the sides of the iron seat as I went. I was frightened and yet fascinated by that rattle and roar of machinery. I could see the great revolving reel reach out and bend the standing grain toward the sickle-fingers, and the stalks fall in an eight-foot swath on the moving canvas plat-

form, where in a steady stream of gold it flowed up on the two elevating carriers and disappeared into the grinding bowels of the binder. I could see two curved iron prongs pack the wheat-stalks together and a steel needle, uncannily dexterous, reach about the bundle, and meet a rising bobbin, where the twine was looped and cut and two iron arms flung the tied sheaf out to the carrier.

When I screamed, high above the rattle of machinery, Jamie stopped so suddenly he almost threw me from my throne.

"What's wrong?" he demanded as he ran back to the binder.

"A mouse!" I quavered. "A mouse has just been carried up with the grain."

And Jamie merely snorted aloud and went back to his tractor. So I said nothing when a frog appeared on my canvas carrier, hopping back again and again as the machinery threatened to engulf it. That's the way, I told myself as I watched valorous leap after leap, that human mud larks escape the grinding wheels of despair. And that foolishly hopping frog became a symbol of life to me. Time after time the ever-moving carrier seemed to be bearing him into a roaring cave of destruction. And time after time he solemnly bobbed back to safety. He kept it up, in fact, until the question of his fate loomed more important than the proper cutting of Jamie's grain. And just when I was beginning to feel I couldn't possibly

stand any further suspense, that *facilis-descensus-Averni* idiot tumbled clumsily off the moving-platform and hopped away to freedom.

But, in spite of strain and noise and dust and oil-smudges, there's a thrill in such work. I can face it without complaint. I like it, in fact, because through it I touch hands with Power. I'm controlling something big, something important. And all this prating about the sadness of a mechanized world, where machinery deadens the soul and blights the spirit of man, impresses me as a trifle foolish. For it's machinery that makes modern man important. It gives him dignity—as one glance at any oil-stained Hercules on a steam-shovel will show you. It bolsters up his ego and makes him arrogant—as a two-minute talk with any dope-smeared garage-worker will persuade you.

And this work gives me a better understanding of my Jamie. He may be a hard man, as hard, in a way, as the machinery he works with. But it's the hard men that keep the world going. They are the seekers and doers, the fighters and the conquerors. Their way may be the way of bugles, echoing across the world, and the planets may be their plaything, and the starry heavens nothing more than their compass. But their moods change. And even metals get tired. And in the blast-furnace of time such men are melted, as the iron over which they labor is melted. My hour will come. And some day before I die I'm going to give

that man of mine lover's asthma or know the reason for my first and final failure as a woman.

That sounds a trifle intense, I'm afraid, for a well-bred English lady. But I'm *feeling* a trifle intense, these days. I'm starved for something. And it's the hungry wolves that devour the villages.

Yet life goes on. And Cleopatra, instead of dallying with princes, is rowing her own barge up and down the Nile. For this repressed ego of mine is at present expressing itself by piloting a rattling self-binder back and forth along a ninety-acre wheat-field, where stubble-dust is my myrrh and my frankincense is the fumes from a tractor-exhaust. And out of it, oddly enough, I'm getting my appeasing taste of glory. For through it I'm linked up with life. I'm helping, in my own small way, to feed a hungry world. I'm justifying my existence. I'm a cog in the pulsing machinery of providence. For the grain from each dusty sheaf that I dump from my carrier will eventually go in to the tall-towered elevator at Elk Crossing, and from there will shower into box-cars and go speeding eastward across the prairie to the head of the Great Lakes, where it will eventually be pumped into great ships which will carry it to Montreal, where, along with millions of its kind, it will go into even greater ships and be carried across the Atlantic, where in turn it will be milled into flour and the hungry children of Lancashire mine-workers and Scottish crofters will gnaw at the bread it makes and still hold that life is good.

All we think of, these days, is wheat. Nothing else seems to count. When our windmill went out of kilter, with no time for repairing it, we reverted meekly to hand-pumping. When we ran out of coffee, the other morning, with no chance of a trip in to the Crossing, we remained satisfied with tea. When letters came from home, after lying for three days in our overlooked mail-box, they remained unread for still another long and toil-burdened day. When I burned my forearm, in my hurry while handling a pan of roast-pork, Jamie, as he gulped down his dinner before hastening back to the fields, abstractedly advised me to cover the wound with egg-white and soda and held out his cup for a second ration of tea. When I learned that Bull McDoel had a new housekeeper, a hydrogenated lady who never wore oil-stained khaki and had once been a spaghetti-slinger in a Winnipeg restaurant, it seemed of much less moment than the fact that Jamie had been disappointed in dating up his threshing-gang and would now have to wait until the Wylie Outfit worked their way northward into our district. And when night came, and darkness put an end to our labor, we tumbled into our beds and slept like the tired animals we were, with no thought as to enemies near or far and no regret for the narrowing interests of life.

Chapter Thirty-One

DEEP as my sleep usually is, one clear and starlit night after Jamie had frowningly proclaimed that an early frost would play hob with his unripened oats, I awakened in the wee sma' hours, perplexed by a faint and flickering glow against my inner room-wall. I tried to persuade myself, in my drowsiness, that it was merely the earliest light of sunrise falling through my window.

But the sun, I remembered, never shone from that particular quarter. And an unnatural darkness still lay over the earth. And I realized, a moment later, that there was a smell of smoke on the air.

That discovery electrified me into life. I was wide enough awake as I tumbled out of bed and ran to the shack window, where I could hear Terry whimpering outside in the darkness.

Then my blood chilled.

For along the vague rim of the prairie I could see a wavering line of flame, punctured by periodic higher blazes crowned with pennons of gray-black smoke. And I knew it was Jamie's farther field of wheat on fire.

It sickened me, for a moment, into utter helplessness. I could hear faint crackling sounds break through the steady hiss of the burning straw. There was little

wind, but the fire ran across the dried stubble with incredible quickness, pyramiding into higher flames as it crept from stook to stook.

"Jamie's wheat!" I croaked, wondering at the wave of benumbing pain that surged through my body. Then, feeling sharp little hammers against my throat, where the blood pulsed hard and thick, I turned and ran toward my husband's bed, calling out to him as I went.

"What is it?" asked Jamie, already on his feet.

"Our wheat's on fire," I gasped as Hugh joined me in a race for the door.

Jamie pushed between us, a moment later, looked out and then dodged back to jerk a blanket from his bed, shouting for Hugh to do the same as he ran toward the water-trough.

But Hugh, apparently, didn't understand that order. What he was groping about in the darkness for I couldn't at the time discern. He called to me, asking where the milk-pails were. But I was too busy, catching up shoes and dressing-gown and snatching a blanket from my own bed, to answer him. I could hear Jamie, at the water-trough, telling me to wet my blanket.

I pretty well soaked myself, in the excitement, but that calamity, I later discovered, was a lucky one. Then I raced after Jamie, following him out to where the line of fire was creeping closer and closer toward his prize-wheat plot.

There, doing as I saw him do, I flailed and slapped

with my wet blanket against that ever-advancing fringe of blood-colored flames. I pounded them out, foot by foot, until I'd worked my way close to the panting Jamie and our arc of obliterated light was a complete one. But while we were busy beating out that central section the line of fire had advanced on either wing and swept past us.

I followed Jamie as he ran back and circled about to attack that more advanced triangle of licking red tongues, on which Hugh was frantically flinging his foolish pails of water. But still the widening peninsula of fire crept on.

"This is too slow," shouted Jamie as Hugh came panting up with two fresh pails. He took my scorched and smoking blanket and flung it over his own. Then, snatching a final pail of water from Hugh, he soaked them both.

"Now, take a corner," he called out.

He meant that command for Hugh, but Hugh, not understanding, was already running with his empty pails back to the water-trough. And every moment was precious. So I caught up the wet blanket-corners, and with the heavy wool held taut between us we bridged the irregular line of fire, with the dragging wet folds sweeping out the flames as we went. Jamie, who had taken time to pull on boots and overalls, stepped over to the burned side and I took the stubble side. But the smoke stung my throat and the heat dried my skin. My heart pounded and my breath came in gasps.

Yet I did my utmost to keep up with Jamie, who ran faster and faster as he realized we were conquering that withering phalanx of flames, where Hugh, when he saw a stook stood in our line of advance, flung the smoking sheaves back on the already charred ground.

The fire on the other wing, however, had crept on unchecked. Its foremost point, before we could swing about and face it, was within a hundred yards of our prize-wheat plot. And Hugh seemed maddeningly slow in bringing fresh water to wet down our scorched and smoldering blankets.

"Can you keep it up?" asked Jamie, mopping the sweat from his face.

"O.K." I gasped, steadying myself for a moment on his arm. And once more we fought our way along that smoke-crowned fringe of flame, smothering it out as we went. Where it started up again, here and there, Hugh flailed it down with his water-soaked dressing-gown. Where it advanced on our right, while we fought it on the left, we staggered to the newer apex of peril and renewed the battle against those groping fingers of red that were reaching out closer and closer toward the heavier-stooked quadrangle where they must never go.

But even our blankets were afire, by this time, and the last of our water was gone. My ears were ringing and my knees, I noticed, betrayed a tendency to collapse under me. But I took what was left of my blanket, as Jamie did with his, and beat at the diminish-

ing line of fire where it advanced to the dried prairie-grass along the fence-line and flared up again with a renewed small fierceness.

I flailed until my arms ached. When my knees gave way beneath me, and I could no longer stand, I crawled from spot to spot, dabbing weakly at the last of the little red flickers that coiled like adders between the yellow stubble-ends. And when the last flame was beaten out I found the world suddenly go black about me and lay luxuriously back on the prairie-sod and imagined I was floating in the blue-green surf somewhere off the Isle of Wight.

When I opened my eyes Jamie had my head in his lap, with a pail of water beside him, into which he was dipping what afterward proved to be a portion of his pajama-jacket, with which he was quietly mopping my smoke-stained face. It seemed very comfortable, having him bending over me that way.

So I promptly closed my eyes again. And he surprised me, as I lay there in the thinning starlight, by stooping down and kissing me. And he might have done it a second time, only, in spite of myself, I sighed both deeply and audibly.

"Is your wheat all right?" I asked as he leaned over me.

It was my old Jamie, gaunt and grim-jawed and slightly streaked with soot. And yet it was Jamie with a difference. It was a Jamie who had stood beside the open grave of his hopes, who had seen his world tremble

and fall away under his very feet. And that torture, I think, must have shaken him out of his torpor. He was looking down at me, for the first time in his life, in a hungry and heart-sick way that made me think of a hurt child in search of understanding.

"Your wheat?" I repeated. "Is it all right?"

His movement was almost one of impatience. There were things of more importance, it implied, than a plot of seed-grain.

"Are *you* all right?" he asked, holding me a little closer to him. I could feel the tremulous straining of those smoky-smelling arms of his. And, being a woman, I knew that the light had in some way come to him. The iron had melted. That it had melted, not in the blast-furnace of time, but in the running flame of burning wheat-straw, didn't seem of much importance at the moment. But the barriers were down.

"I was never happier in my life," I told him. Yet one small cloud kept shadowing the silver sky-line of contentment. "But have we saved your prize wheat, Jamie?"

For I was, after all, a wheat-farmer's wife.

"Thanks to you, it's saved," he said as he made me sit up and take a drink of water.

"Where's Hugh?" I asked as I settled down in my husband's arms again.

"He's back at the shack," answered Jamie, "making a pot of tea for us. And I'm going to carry you in now."

"Let's stay here," I said, smiling at the thought of being carried in and smiling still again as Jamie's smoky-smelling arms tightened about me. "You know, I'm never again going to be jealous of that wheat of yours."

"You've no need to," responded Jamie.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, from now on, you're always going to come first," said the solemn slow voice so close to me.

I lay silent a moment, thinking this over. Then, for the second time in my life, I found the courage to draw my granitic old Jamie down to me and kiss him.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I SLEPT late, the next morning, and Jamie himself brought me my breakfast about ten. He was a bit awkward about it, and he looked bony and tired and haggard, as though the burden he'd been carrying was a trifle too heavy for even his broad shoulders. But there was a light in his eye, as he sat down on the bed beside me, that I'd never seen before.

"You're a brick," he said, rather shamefacedly. But the unlooked-for tenderness of his big bony hand as he stroked my hair brought a fluttery little ache somewhere under my breast-bone. And when he held me close, with a hunger that rather took my breath away, I knew that he didn't altogether hate his grab-bag wife.

"It's funny," he said, "how you get jolted out of your furrow now and then."

"But the fall plowing," I reminded him, "must still go on."

He looked at me, reprovingly, like a child whose plum-cake has been too abruptly taken away from him. But Jamie, I knew, would always be Jamie. He wasn't, and never could be, a seraph in chocolate. No overnight miracle would keep him from being a hard-sinewed and hard-driving toiler with his first thoughts always turned toward the sterner issues of life. But there were certain things, I remembered, that I still

might teach him. And a good worker, I've somewhere heard, makes a good worshiper.

Even at the moment, in fact, my Jamie was trying to tell me that he had always cared for me more than he'd been ready to admit. It was after he had kissed me, quite solemnly, and sat studying my face with those cavernous brown eyes of his, that he saw for the first time how my lashes had been singed away.

"Will they grow again?" he asked. His look was one of dismay slightly tinged with guilt.

"Of course," I told him. "But who started that fire?"

I could see the steel come out of the scabbard.

"I don't care to talk about that."

"But it must have been done deliberately," I persisted.

"Oh, I'll straighten that out," proclaimed Jamie. He stood up, very tall, looked at my fire-scorched forearms, and then sat down on the bed beside me again. "But there's another thing comes first."

"What is it?" I asked, wondering whether it was manifest destiny or just a weighted-down mattress that brought our bodies so companionably together.

"You once told me something," he was saying, "that I didn't have the sense to understand. You said I was so mixed up with wheat that I was buried in it. And I've been pulling so hard for just one end that I plumb lost my perspective."

"But you were growing the best wheat in the world," I reminded him.

"Well, I've grown it," proclaimed Jamie. "And now I've done it it doesn't seem so important as I imagined."

"You mustn't say that."

"I don't mean that I'm not proud of my wheat," he went on. "Wheat growing, I guess, is bred right in my bones. And it's the one thing that's going to make life worth living for us. But——"

"No, Jamie," I interrupted. "You're wrong there. There's something more important than wheat."

"What is it?" he asked.

"This," I answered.

And he was still locked in my arms when a patter of horse-hoofs broke in on us and my handsome Mountie and a cowboy in chaps and a five-gallon hat came prancing up to our door-step. Jamie, with a disturbingly hardening face, went out to them. And the three men talked together, for several minutes, before Jamie returned to me.

"What's happened?" I asked, realizing that something had both shocked and sobered him.

"Bull McDoel's been shot," he said with a quietness that was purely coerced.

"You don't mean killed?" I cried, finding it hard to think of that ruddy and robust figure relinquishing any jot of its vigor.

Jamie shook his head.

"A bullet plowed up eight or nine inches of arm-

flesh. But they've got it out and given him serum. Oh, he'll be all right. But the police want me over there. And I guess I'd better go."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it was Forgan did the shooting. He was seen last night, after he set that fire, and trailed back to the McDoel ranch. There, according to Spike's story, McDoel tried to keep his own skirts clean by declining to help Forgan away when he was cornered. And in the mix-up a gun went off."

"And Forgan got away," I cried, chilled by the shadow of old hatreds.

"Oh, no, they're holding him," explained my grim-eyed Jamie. "And that's why I've got to get over there."

But I called after Jamie as he was hurrying away.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" he asked, turning in the doorway.

"To kiss your wife," I reminded him. And he did so, several times, before putting on his battered old sombrero and faring forth to his world of men and tumult. . . .

It's autumn again, and the wild geese will soon be flying southward. The nights are colder, and in the air is a feeling of completion, not untouched by sadness. All the sheaves of gold have been gathered from the prairie floor and the russet stubble, lovely as it is in the slanting sunlight, has an empty and lonely look. The threshing-gangs have come and gone, the grain-

bins are filled, and we had two Mounties to manage the crowd when Jamie's prize wheat went through the separator and three press-photographers tried to lure me out in their midst.

But across that trampled stubble now, where the quiet sunlight gives a feeling of richness to the autumn afternoon, only compact flocks of wild-ducks come in search of scattered seed. The open range, to the northwest, is brown and dry, the only visible green lying about the fringes of marsh and muskeg, where the red-wing blackbirds rise in companionable groups and make ready to fly south.

Jamie is out on his land again, deep in his task of fall plowing. For life must go on, and the soil must be got ready for another season, for another seeding. Terry, like a true philosopher, is making the best of the more and more meager sunlight, asleep on my clean-swept door-step. The air is cool and crystalline, under a high-arching dome of blue flecked with white-topped cumulus clouds that remind me of yacht-sails in the Solent. Along the sky-line, here and there, I can see drifting plumes of smoke, where the grain ranchers are burning their straw. They are clearing the stage for another act of the wide and ancient drama, the drama that moves so slowly. But the soil, I remember, teaches one to be patient.

I realize that truth as I stand in the doorway, watching Jamie and his gang-plow as they drift along the dark line of the horizon. They move slowly, a patient

black silhouette against a receding and opaline background. And remembering that I have something to tell that black-figured king of toil, so high on his iron plow-seat, something that will link him still closer to the umber-toned acres over which he so solemnly cruises, I realize that I, too, am like the soil. I feel the old and timeless bond that exists between Mother Earth, so patient and passive and willing to give, and the rapture-torn heart of womanhood itself.

THE END